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EMIC PERSPECTIVES: THE FRESHMAN INTEREST GROUP PROGRAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

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EMIC PERSPECTIVES: THE FRESHMAN INTEREST GROUP PROGRAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to all participants of the Freshman Interest Group Program at The University of Texas at Austin, past, present and future.

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EMIC PERSPECTIVES: THE FRESHMAN INTEREST GROUP PROGRAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

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This study explored the emic perspective of participating in the Freshman Interest Group (FIG) Program at The University of Texas at Austin. This study employed a qualitative methodology to capture the emic perspective of participating in a FIG. Initially, student responses to a previously administered course-instructor survey were analyzed using content analysis. Student responses to the question "The most valuable part of being in a FIG was" were coded for the first five years in which the program operated. The patterns, themes and categories that emerged from the content analysis were used to describe the student experience. To further triangulate the data, focus groups of currently enrolled former FIG participants were formed and students were asked to reflect on the theme that emerged from the content analysis. The themes were also reviewed by three comparison institutions with similarly structured FIG programs.

The key findings that emerged from the data were incorporated into a model to represent the student experience. Participating in a FIG was found to be an individual experience for each participant. Students distinguished between the structure elements of the program and the individuals with whom they interacted while in the program. The model that emerged describes the emic perspective of participants of the FIG program.

By studying the student perspective of participating in a successful learning community, this research sought to inform researchers and administrators about the value of learning communities. A deeper understanding of what particular elements were important to the student experience can also inform practice on creating other learning communities and student retention efforts.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

At no time in recent history has the study of college student retention been so important. According to Smith (2003), with the possibility of the Bush administration linking financial aid to retention and graduation rates, understanding this process can have a profound impact on a college or university's future. Within the state of Texas, retention is on the minds of college and university administrators who are also facing increased scrutiny of their retention and graduation rates following tuition deregulation (HB 3015, 54.0515, e (2)). While current federal and state regulations are important motivators for college and universities to care about student retention, the challenge of retaining students has plagued colleges and universities for more than 50 years.

Initially, the concept of retaining college students was discussed in colleges and universities following World War II as students entered the classroom in record numbers requiring assistance in the transition to university life. Many colleges and universities felt obligated to assist those students, many of them veterans, with their academic success. Specifically, tutorial programs, learning centers and career centers were created to address the needs of those students (Rudolph, 1962).

However, the boom of the post-war enrollment meant that universities did not worry about their enrollments, except to control the overly rapid expansion of campuses. To accommodate that expansion, colleges and universities began major construction campaigns, added degree programs and improved student services (Freeland, 1989). "Between 1952 and 1960, the number of young Americans enrolling in college increased from 2.1 million to 3.6 million, while the proportion attending rose from 14 percent to 22 percent" (Freeland, 1989, p.599). Rapid expansion of colleges and universities in the 1960's was followed by a decline in enrollments in the 1970's (Astin, 1975). This dramatic drop in enrollment, due in large part to declining birthrates, caused major concerns on many campuses. How could colleges and universities afford to continue to support the size, structure and programs created to accommodate twice as many students?

The history of retention programs as illustrated above points to financial reasons as a significant motivator for institutions of higher education to promote student retention. According to Astin (1975), the challenge most often associated with declining enrollment or student attrition is financial.

> In most private institutions, income derives largely from tuition and fees; therefore, each new student brings new income, each student retained maintains that income. In the public sector, bulk of income comes from state appropriations, which are usually allocated in direct proportion to projected enrollments (pg. 2).

The need to attract and retain students becomes more important as the institution's reliance on tuition increases. The rapid expansion of colleges and universities in the 1960's produced a reliance on increased enrollments to support the expansion. Astin (1975) highlights the link between enrollments and

college finances: a 10% increase in enrollment will bring a 10% increase in revenue, but will not dramatically increase costs. However, a 10% decline in enrollment, will produce a 10% decline in revenue, but not a 10% decline in costs.

Fenske and Hughes (1989) argue that it is less expensive for colleges to retain the students they have than to recruit new ones. They offer the following case example to illustrate the financial benefits of retaining students:

> For example, if the dropout rate is approximately 40 percent over the first three years of an undergraduate program in a college with 1,000 students, the 400 students who fail to graduate will provide less than half of their four-year tuition total to the college. Cutting the dropout rate in half would be equivalent to locating, recruiting and enrolling 200 new students over the same period. The tuition paid to the college would increase proportionately, and this increase would be gained more efficiently, since programs to retain students already on campus are much cheaper than recruiting efforts off campus (p. 567-568).

Similarly, Levitz, Noel and Richter (1999) offer yet another financial argument for the retention of students.

> Too often, reducing the dropout rate is not recognized as one of the most effective ways to add full-time equivalents, thereby broadening an institution's revenue base. Our research shows that by reducing the number of freshmen dropouts by a single student, a four-year institution will, on average, 'save' $15,000 to $25,000 in gross revenue over four to five years. Investing in retention programming is good business. Few, if any, other institutional investments will yield such a high return (p.48).

Thus, retaining students can mean significant cost differences for colleges and universities. The reliance on student enrollment for tuition and fee revenue is a major concern for small, private institutions. That is not to say that public or state-assisted universities do not rely on enrollments as most state-funding formulas are based on a per student or per credit hour calculation. However, for

those institutions not receiving funds, the difference in enrollment is most significant.

It should be noted that not all institutions support retention efforts for purely financial reasons. It is commonly recognized that a college degree is an important certificate of occupational entry, without which access to prestigious positions in society becomes more difficult (Tinto, 1993). Additionally, numerous studies have illustrated what educators have long assumed: workers with college degrees earn more than those without.

Trow's (1989) arguments further illustrate the philosophical considerations of the retention issue. He argues that retention is good for society and produces the type of citizen the United States needs and wants. According to Trow (1989, p. 582) there are many benefits of American higher education:

> • Higher education has substantial effects on the attitudes of those exposed to it.
>
> • People who have been to college or university, on the whole, view public issues in a longer time perspective than do less well-educated people.
>
> • The capacity of citizens to learn how to learn is another skill that is gained or enhanced by exposure to higher education.
>
> • In American political life, higher education has a familiar role as home of the cultural critic of the established political order and the nursery of radical and even revolutionary student movements. But less dramatically and visibly, the expansion and democratization of higher education may also work to legitimate the political and social order by rewarding talent and effort rather than merely serving as a cultural apparatus of the ruling classes by ensuring the passage of power and privilege across generations.

Levitz, Noel & Richter (1999) also provide powerful arguments for the philosophical retention of students. They argue on an institutional level that "the

success of an institution and the success of its students are inseparable" because "student persistence to the completion of educational goals is a key indicator of student satisfaction and success" (p.31).

Student satisfaction and success are not just of interest to an individual institution: legislators and accreditation bodies are interested in these measures to determine how well an institution is meeting its goals and mission. Increased pressure from legislators has also impacted the need for retention programs. As the public demands more accountability for spending, legislative bodies react by looking at input-output cost analyses. If the goal of state-supported education is to produce graduates with the skills to help improve the state, then legislators want the most bang for their buck. For each graduate the university produces, additional funding may be approved, prestige increased or pressure to compete decreased. Trow (1989) suggests that virtually every state has demanded greater accountability from the colleges and universities for use of appropriated funds.

The importance of retention as a regulatory, financial and social issue has led colleges and universities to develop programs to address student retention and further illustrates the need for additional research about the impact of those programs.

RATIONALE

Student development researchers have spent the better part of the last 30 years studying college student retention (Cuseo, 2003). Most of the retention literature focused on identifying reasons why students leave higher education. These studies provided a foundation for understanding student departure as well as a framework from which programmatic efforts were developed. These

programmatic efforts focused on eliminating the causes of student departure, including financial problems, poor pre-college academic preparation and other issues. More recently, the literature has focused on identifying not just the reasons why students leave, but conversely, *why* they stay, and the impact those staying factors have on their student success.

Definition of Terms

Retention, as defined by The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary is: "the power to retain something; or a capacity for holding or keeping something" (pg. 2572). Educationally, the term has come to mean the ability of a college or university to attract and keep students from initial matriculation through completion of a degree (Cuseo, 2003).

Additional terminology is used to describe students at different stages of the retention cycle. Retention experts are most interested not in the students that stay at a university, but in those who leave without completing a degree. One of the greatest challenges in retention research is identifying students who have left the university and determining what factors can be attributed to their departure. Although there are many factors that affect student retention, most researchers focus their research on students who initially aspired to at least a bachelor's degree (Astin, 1971, 1975, 1993). Based on this assumption, most retention researchers have agreed on the following terminology to describe students in their studies.

A persister, as defined by Astin (1975), "is enrolled full time in graduate or professional school; has earned the B.A. (or a higher) degree; or has completed four years of college, is enrolled full time, and is still pursuing at least the

bachelor's degree," (pg. 9). The category of persisters is most useful as a comparison group to those who do not complete their degrees.

Stopout is a term unique to higher education, defining a person who has left higher education temporarily, but still intends to complete a degree. Specifically, Astin defines a stopout as "any nonpersister who is still planning to obtain at least a bachelor's degree," (1975, pg. 9) and who is enrolled full time as an undergraduate; has completed four years of undergraduate work without graduating; or has been continuously enrolled since matriculation. Since students can stopout at any point in their educational career, this category is useful for determining if specific personal or institutional factors influenced the students' decision to leave. Identifying stopouts is also a difficult challenge for researchers.

Defining the final comparison group of students is more difficult. Since, in theory, a student can return to higher education at any time, use of the term dropout is less standard. Astin (1975) defines dropouts as "all students who cannot be classified as either persisters or stopouts" (pg. 10) as well as those who have not been continuously enrolled or are no longer pursuing a bachelor's degree. On the other hand, Tinto (1993) argues that use of the term dropout is too inclusive, and does not take into account different forms or reasons for leaving, including academic dismissal. He argues that researchers must broaden their terminology to be inclusive of different types of leavers; specifically, institutional departures, "those who leave institutions," and system departures, "those who withdraw from all forms of formal higher educational participation," (1993, p.36). Once a student can be clearly defined as a leaver or dropout, research into the reasons for that departure can be very rewarding. However,

determining whether or not a student should be defined as a stopout or a dropout can be a challenge.

This dissertation will focus on the retention of first-to-second year freshman students of traditional age (defined as students aged 16-19 who enroll immediately upon completion of a high school diploma) at a 4-year public institution. Selection of the first to second year retention is important for many reasons. As Levitz, Noel and Richter (1999) note, "the first-to-second-year attrition rate is perhaps the most important determinate of an institution's graduation rate. We have observed that attrition rates are halved each subsequent year after the first year" (p.37). For this reason, most retention research has been done on the first to second year. This study will follow that same research tradition.

Finally, this study seeks to understand the emic perspective of participating in a Freshman Interest Group. Emic refers to "features or items analyzed with respect to their role as structural units within a system" (American Heritage Dictionary, 2000, p.585). An emic perspective focuses on "cultural distinctions that are meaningful to the members of a given society. The native members of a culture, [in this case, the FIG participants,] are the sole judges of the validity of an emic description" (Lett, 1996, p.382).

Theoretical Foundation

Numerous researchers and higher education policy makers have called for increased attention to retaining students in their first year. Landmark reports in higher education including the Wingspread Group's report *An American Imperative: Higher expectations for higher education* (1993) as well as the Boyer

Commission's Blueprint for Research Universities (1998) helped further push the issue of retention to the forefront of college and university programming. While these reports brought attention to the policy issue of retention, several prominent researchers had already studied the phenomenon of student departure.

Tinto's work is considered by many to be the foundation of understanding for the retention puzzle. His *Theory of Student Departure* (1993) helps explain student attrition by examining the role of integration of a student into the academic and social culture of the institution. He argues that a student's decision to leave an institution is influenced by the degree to which that student has become integrated into the institution.

Similarly, Astin's *Theory of Involvement* (1984) suggests that the more students are involved in their college experiences, the more likely they are to persist. Involvement encompasses both physical and psychological effort. Both these models are useful in understanding the departure process.

In considering the impact of theories about student retention, researchers have attempted to define for colleges and universities the factors most affecting student retention and success.

> We know that involvement matters. As numerous researchers have pointed out (e.g. Astin, 1984; Malette & Cabrera, 1991; Nora, 1987; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1977) the greater the students' involvement or integration in the life of the college the greater the likelihood that they will persist. We also know that involvement influences learning. Generally speaking, the greater the students' involvement in the life of the college, especially its academic life, the greater their acquisition of knowledge and development of skills (Tinto, 1997, p.600).

One of the most successful ways of involving students comes through collaborative learning. Collaborative learning is "an umbrella term for a variety

of educational approaches involving joint intellectual effort by students, or students and teachers together" (Smith & MacGregor, 1992, p.10). In essence, collaborative learning is about building together a community, a community of learners. While there are multiple successful collaborative learning strategies in the literature, the term learning community refers to "a purposeful restructuring of the curriculum to link together courses so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning and increased interaction with faculty and fellow students" (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews & Smith, 1990, p. 5). Multiple learning community initiatives exist, but one of the most popular and successful models for large institutions is the Freshman Interest Group (FIG) program model. This model incorporates a cohort of students enrolled in a set of common courses while attending a weekly transitional seminar. This model's success is illustrated through its adoption at many college campuses, as well as through significant improvement in retention rates. Quantitative data exist to document positive effects on student retention, but little is known about how participation in a learning community, like a FIG, affects students' learning experiences and what specific aspects of the FIG have the most impact on student success and retention.

The effectiveness of learning communities, including FIGs, has been demonstrated to have a positive effect on retention; however, there remains little research to support how or why the programs really impact student learning. This dissertation seeks to add to the body of knowledge about retention programs and learning communities, specifically, by studying a learning community already proven to be successful. Most retention research is done using a quasi-experimental design in which students enrolled in a retention

program are compared with similar students not in a retention program (Cuseo, 2003). While this method can be useful in determining the effectiveness of a program, it does little to contribute to the knowledge about how the program works, and student perceptions of the effectiveness of the program. By studying the FIG program at the University of Texas at Austin, a learning community retention program already proven successful, the intricacies of a learning community can be discussed in more detail.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM/PURPOSE

What, then, is it about the Freshman Interest Group (FIG) Program that contributes to student experience, and ultimately to successful retention? With the need to understand retention becoming so important, an understanding of the specific programmatic elements that contribute to that success is paramount. The purpose of this study is to understand, from a student perspective, the experience of participating in a Freshman Interest Group (FIG) at The University of Texas at Austin. Through FIG program document examination, this study seeks to discover the ways in which FIG participation is valued by students. This study seeks to enhance the understanding of the power of learning communities by specifically identifying program components that students value in their FIG experience. With that in mind, this study is designed to address the following research question:

What is the voice of the students, the emic perspectives, on the Freshman Interest Group (FIG) experience?

METHODS

An essential component of understanding retention is the exploration of student experiences. While it is important to look at the outcomes of programming to determine if an improvement in retention rates has occurred, merely looking at that data does not tell the story of the student experience. The undergraduate student experience, especially in the first year is arguably a complex one (Astin, 1985; Cuseo, 2003; Tinto, 1993); accordingly, this study uses multiple measures to understand the student experience in the Freshman Interest Group Program.

This study builds a case for initial qualitative methods to explore the impact of the FIG program at UT-Austin on student learning and retention. Quantitative research describes information that can be manipulated numerically (Cuseo, 2003). Quantitative analysis is frequently used in higher education to provide information about students including survey results, Grade Point Average (GPA), retention percentages and other student-outcome variables including frequency of visits with faculty (Astin, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Qualitative data, on the other hand, "take the form of human actions and words and they are analyzed by means of human instruments" (Cuseo, 2003, p. 28). Qualitative research methods take many forms, including interviews, focus groups, document review and observation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This study's results were generated by a qualitative method and also include descriptive statistics, thereby allowing a greater understanding of the retention experience. Cuseo (2003) argues for the use of multiple ways of presenting data, "the data generated by these two styles of inquiry can provide complementary sources of evidence, with

the disadvantages of one method being offset or counterbalanced by the advantages of the other" (p. 29).

Data Collection and Analysis

Using Tinto's Theory of Student Departure (1993) and Astin's Theory of Involvement (1984) as a foundation, this study examined student perceptions of the importance of various programmatic elements within the FIG program on their first-year experience. Using data collected from the first five years of the FIG program, student responses on a program evaluation form were analyzed. The student responses, short answer sentences and phrases, were examined using qualitative methodology. The phenomenological approach to data collection was used. This type of qualitative approach represents the essence of a shared experience (Patton, 2003). Because understanding college student experiences, particularly those of participants in the FIG program, can be complex, this research was well suited for a qualitative approach.

Data analysis in the qualitative tradition is based on three types of coding procedures: open, axial and selective (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Open coding, usually done at the beginning of analysis seeks to categorize data by labeling individual phenomena (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Categories are formed and organized around the central research questions. While this analysis is usually done line-by-line with transcribed data from an interview or recorded focus group, this study examined the sentences and phrases recorded by FIG students on the evaluation forms. In the second stage, axial coding, causal, intervening and contextual factors are examined and categorized (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Again, careful attention is paid to the data as they are re-examined by coding

categories in relation to each other. Finally, selective coding involves identifying key elements and categories after theoretical saturation. "Identifying the story is a key aspect in formulating the grounded theory. The story assists in locating the most salient aspects of the data and turning them into general, descriptive sentences" (Brown, Stevens, Troiano & Schneider, 2002, p. 178). The data are then mapped out narratively, usually in smaller categories capable of revealing information to the researcher. To triangulate the results, a focus group of former FIG students still in attendance at the University (years 1998-2002) examined and discussed the themes emerging from the survey analysis. Further issues of validity and trustworthiness will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Participant and Site Selection

The selection of the University of Texas at Austin as the study site is important for many reasons. First, as the largest single-campus institution in the United States, the ability of the institution to understand and address issues of student retention, involvement and community is essential. Other institutions of similar profile can learn from this program to implement changes on their own campus. Secondly, the FIG program on this campus has only been researched in a quantitative manner. While data from this research have proven useful to the institution in understanding effects on retention, the larger issue of involvement and community remain largely a mystery. The nature of this research lends itself to a single-institution study because of the intense nature of qualitative methodologies. Interviewing, observation and document review can be more difficult to achieve in situations where the researcher is an outsider. Because FIG participants consistently out-perform non-FIG students in both GPA and

retention measures, this program is ideal for future research. Finally, the UT-Austin Division of Student Affairs, whose responsibility includes the area of community and involvement, could gain from any knowledge developed in this area and translate that knowledge into other areas outside of the FIG program. This study supports other institutions in their efforts to create similar programs by contributing to the body of literature about learning communities and FIG programs.

SUMMARY

By illuminating educators about the student experience in learning communities, this study impacts both future research and future programming efforts. The literature on student retention, while rich in quantitative studies, is strengthened by research conducted using qualitative methodology. "What we do not yet know, or at least have not yet adequately documented, is how (emphasis added) involvement is shaped within the differing institutions of higher education by student educational experiences" (Smith & MacGregor, 1992, p.11). Additionally, by helping educators to understand the role of involvement and community in college student experiences, this research impacts future programming efforts in student affairs and curricular efforts in academic affairs. There is a paucity of research involving large, public research institutions as the research study site, and more must be learned about this type of institution. While many of the ideas for learning communities are developed at small institutions, administrators can frequently translate programming successes of large institutions more readily than those from smaller schools.

This dissertation is organized in six chapters. Chapter 2 reviews the literature that influenced this study including a further discussion of Tinto (1993) and Astin's (1984) theories. The third chapter examines the qualitative methods in greater detail. Data collection results are presented in Chapter 4. Finally, Chapters 5 and 6 examine the results, draw conclusions, and recommend future research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF RETENTION

As mentioned previously, there are several foundations upon which our understanding of retention is built. The work of two prominent scholars helps further our understanding of the retention puzzle and provides structure for programming to follow. Integral to both theories are the concepts of involvement and integration.

Tinto's Theory of Student Departure

First introduced in 1975 and revised in 1993, Tinto's Theory of Student Departure postulates that student retention is related to the degree to which a student becomes integrated into the college or university (Tinto, 1975, 1993). His theory rests on his research and connections to two types of studies: Durkheim's study of suicide and Van Gannep's work with rites of passages. Tinto suggests that the decision to withdraw from an institution of higher education shares similar characteristics to suicide: integration, either into society, as in the case of suicide, or the institution, in the case of student departure, is essential (1993). Failure to be sufficiently integrated has serious impact. Tinto's use of rites of passage research further describes the complex process of integration. According to Tinto (1993), becoming a member of a college community involves three stages: (1) separation from past communities, like high-school friends and

parents; (2) transition to the new community, accomplished by learning the expectations and values of that group; and (3) incorporation fully into the new community, revealed through the adoption of norms and behavior. This complex model examines pre-enrollment characteristics, motivation to degree completion and institutional experiences to explain student departure. Tinto (1993) suggests that pre-enrollment characteristics can influence commitment, the degree to which a student experiences both academic and social integration is crucial.

Critical to the understanding of this dissertation is Tinto's distinction between academic and social integration. Academic integration is usually reflected in student grades, because those grades most closely represent an integration of the academic expectations of the school, but encompasses the whole formal education of a student (Tinto, 1993). Social integration is a result of interactions with others – peers, faculty and staff, both inside and outside of the classroom (Tinto, 1993).

Having reached "near paradigmatic status in the study of undergraduate retention," (Berger & Milem,1999, p.642), Tinto's theory has been studied and examined by numerous researchers (Bean, 1980; Berger & Braxton, 1998; Berger & Milem, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980) who found the model to be useful in explaining student departure. While many studies have used quantitative data to illustrate the utility of this model, Tinto himself advises extending qualitative inquiry to further advance our understanding of student departure (1993).

Astin's Theory of Involvement

Since 1975, Astin's longitudinal studies of college student behavior, characteristics and trends have influenced higher education's understanding of the college student population. Capitalizing on longitudinal data of college dropouts, Astin found that "the factors that contributed to the student's remaining in college suggested involvement, whereas those that contributed to the student's dropping out implied a lack of involvement" (Astin, 1984, p.302). Simply stated, involvement refers to "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (Astin, 1984, p.297). Involvement includes many things including participation in a campus club, active engagement in a classroom discussion or one-on-one interaction with peers and friends. To further explain this theory, Astin offers five postulates: (1) involvement is both physical and psychological; (2) involvement occurs along a continuum; (3) quality and quantity of involvement is important; (4) student learning and development is related to the time and effort put into an activity; and (5) educational policy or practice effectiveness is related to its ability to involve students (1984).

The importance of involvement has been studied using a number of variables including co-curricular activities, residence hall participation and involvement in a Greek-letter organization, just to name a few (Berger & Milem,1999; Davis, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Taylor & Howard-Hamilton, 1996). Further extending the theory of involvement, Kuh, Schuh, Whitt and associates (1991) examined undergraduate colleges deemed to be successful in involving students. Their report "Involving Colleges" (1991) suggested institutional and programmatic contributions to promote greater

student involvement including creation of smaller sub-communities of student learners in which the size of the institution was made to feel smaller, and the "blurred boundaries between in-class and out-of-class learning and personal development opportunities" (p.128). This and other important studies including the Student Learning Imperative (ACPA, 1994) argue for the creation of seamlessness between student involvement in both in-class and out-of-class experiences.

LEARNING COMMUNITIES

As illustrated above, many researchers have suggested a need to pay increased attention to creating environments in which students can become involved and integrated into the campus community. One such model is the learning community. A learning community is defined as "a purposeful restructuring of the curriculum to link together courses so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning and increased interaction with faculty and fellow students" (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews & Smith, 1990). While this dissertation focuses on a specific type of learning community, it is important to understand the history of the development of learning communities in higher education.

History of Learning Communities

Attempts to give greater meaning to student learning experiences have been underway for almost 80 years. As the curriculum in American higher education has experienced a pendulum swing from liberal education to

professional and research specialization and back again (Rudolph, 1962), several educators from within both academic and student affairs have sought to create opportunities to use higher education as an opportunity to develop the whole student. The idea of educating the whole student and the roots of learning communities can be traced back as early as 1920, to the work of Alexander Meiklejohn and John Dewey (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews & Smith, 1990).

The earliest development of a learning community can be traced back to the University of Wisconsin in 1927. In the years leading up to the creation of the Experimental College, Meiklejohn wrote about his distress in witnessing increased specialization and fragmentation in the curriculum (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews & Smith, 1990). Instead, he advocated for using education to create a more educated citizenry and for the promotion of democracy. To achieve this goal, his program focused on holistically studying both ancient Athens and modern America. As a "full-time, two-year, lower division program" (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews & Smith, 1990, p.11), Meiklejohn's curriculum sought to connect students' classroom and real world activities through the study of great books and research projects. Although his program at the University of Wisconsin was abandoned after only a few years, he is best remembered for "his insights about the fundamental importance of structure, curricular coherence and community" (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews & Smith, 1990, p. 12).

While Meiklejohn is most remembered for his contributions to structure, John Dewey's contributions to modern-day learning communities focus on student-centered learning. Associated with many progressive ideas about student development and education, Dewey believed that "learning is an

inherently social process" (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews & Smith, 1990, p.16) and advocated for a more balanced role between student and teacher, one in which "shared inquiry" ruled. Like Meiklejohn, Dewey was critical of fragmentation of the curriculum and learning process. Although Meiklejohn is most usually associated with a community-centered learning process and Dewey an individual-centered process, both educators believed strongly in the role of higher education to develop an educated citizenry (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews & Smith, 1990).

Finally, two other reforms influence today's understanding of learning communities: Tussman's Experiment at Berkeley and Evergreen State's Coordinated Studies Program. Tussman sought to resolve "the internal tension that resulted from being both universities and colleges at the same time" (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews & Smith, 1990, p.12). This dualism of both specialized and general education requirements gave no meaning to the lower-division curriculum. Instead, he argued for the creation of programs, around which the curriculum was specialized, instead of a smattering of unrelated courses (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews & Smith, 1990). Although his program was short-lived (1965-1969), he influenced curricular reforms at Evergreen State College in Washington during the 1970's. Struggling again with the dualistic nature of higher education described by Tussman, the faculty at Evergreen State College sought to create programs that would prepare students for participation in democracy (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews & Smith, 1990). The "coordinated studies program," as it became known, focused on yearlong learning communities organized around interdisciplinary themes (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews & Smith, 1990). This model has served as a foundation for

dozens of other learning community models, including the Freshman Interest Group (FIG) Program.

Descriptions of Learning Communities

Many types of learning communities exist on college campuses. While each may have a separate name, model and mode of implementation, most generally follow one of three major models. Learning communities can be

> any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses – or actually restructure the curricular material entirely – so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews & Smith, 1990, p. 19).

Those three models and their curricular structures will be discussed here.

The first model includes *paired or clustered classes*, sometimes known as linked courses or learning clusters. This model while appropriate for all types of institutions, is usually found at smaller colleges. Characterized by a cohort of students taking courses together that are paired or linked thematically, this model attempts to involve faculty through collaborative planning or connected course content (Love & Tokuno, 1999, Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews & Smith, 1990).

A second model involves *team-taught programs*. Team-taught programs are highly structured cohorts of both students and faculty from different disciplines. Instruction takes place in block mode, whereby the courses are structured around a theme. Three or four faculty must collaborate to insure that the curriculum is linked together around a theme. Also called coordinated

studies programs, this model more closely resembles the Meiklejohn or Tussman experiments, because of the integrated nature of the courses being taught (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews & Smith, 1990; Love & Tokuno, 1999). A departure from traditional ways of scheduling and teaching classes, this method has been used successfully at both large and small colleges, but requires significantly more faculty involvement.

The final model, *student cohorts in larger classes*, is primarily used in larger universities. Also known as Freshman Interest Groups or Federated Learning Communities, this model involves cohort registration in two or three courses and an integrative seminar (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews & Smith, 1990; Love & Tokuno, 1999). Unlike the other models, faculty usually do not collaborate on the curriculum, instead connections are made in the seminar.

Regardless of model, all learning communities share similar dimensions. These dimensions, identified as student collaboration, faculty collaboration, curricular coordination and shared setting (Love & Tokuno, 1999) vary to degrees within each model, but serve as the foundation for a common understanding of a learning community.

Freshman Interest Groups at the University of Texas at Austin

Following the definitions outlined above, the Freshman Interest Group (FIG) program at The University of Texas at Austin most closely resembles the third model, student cohorts in large classes. Like other successful FIG programs around the country, the FIG program at UT-Austin was created in 1998 in response to a growing concern about the undergraduate experience on a large campus. Modeled after other successful programs at large, public, research

institutions like the University of Washington, the University of Oregon and the University of Missouri-Columbia, the FIG program at UT-Austin involves large courses and a cohort registration structure, like the student cohort in the large class model illustrates. A more complete outline of the FIG program follows.

Profile

The University of Texas at Austin is the academic flagship and largest component of the 15 institution University of Texas System. UT Austin is a major research university that supports 118 undergraduate degree programs, 196 graduate degree programs and two special professional programs through 15 colleges and schools. UT Austin, the largest single-campus institution in the nation, is home to more than 50,000 students, 2,700 faculty, and 17,000 staff members. Approximately 6,500 new freshmen enrolled in the Fall 2003. From teaching, to research, to public service, the University's activities support its core purpose: to transform lives for the benefit of society through the core values of learning, discovery, freedom, leadership, individual opportunity, and responsibility (The University of Texas at Austin, 2002).

The impetus to develop the FIG program evolved from a growing concern for improving the undergraduate experience. The University of Texas at Austin was fighting a public perception that students were just numbers at the institution. The Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs decided to initiate the program to improve the first-year experience of students at the University, both inside and outside of the classroom. The FIG model, successfully used by peer institutions like the universities of Washington,

Oregon and Missouri, was adapted to meet the needs of students at The University of Texas at Austin.

Recognizing that improvements in student retention, student satisfaction and a sense of community were necessary, the following objectives were defined:

- to provide more systematic and effective support of freshmen during their transition to the university environment
- to integrate the academic and social experience of a student, for the benefit of both, and enable a freshman more quickly to feel a sense of connection and belonging at the university
- to use the weekly non-credit seminars as a forum for introducing students to academic resources, to treasures of the university, and to information about their field of study or possible fields of study
- to facilitate the formation of study groups
- to promote the belief that the sense of community and the knowledge of resources that students acquire from being in a FIG will benefit them academically and personally—thus increasing the likelihood of their persistence at the University
- that FIGs will be an antidote to the pervasive (mostly unfounded) perception that the average freshman "gets lost" at UT and is "only a social security number" (The University of Texas at Austin, 1999).

Program Composition

Like many FIG programs across the country and as described in the definition of learning communities above, the UT-Austin program involves a cohort of students in a cluster registration. A FIG is a cohort of 20 freshmen who take three courses together the first semester of their freshman year and attend a weekly seminar together. The FIG is a coherent partial schedule; academic courses in the FIG are selected to satisfy general education or major

requirements. FIGs can be thematically structured (as in Liberal Arts) or geared to a specific major or area of study (as in Engineering, Fine Arts, and Natural Sciences). One of the three courses is usually small so that students can get to know each other and recognize each other in larger classes. Instructional resources are not affected; FIGs use seats in existing courses.

In addition, the 20 students in the FIG attend a weekly seminar, also known as a FIG seminar. This seminar appears on students' registration as one hour per week, although the course bears no academic credit and costs nothing to the student. The seminar is designed to introduce students to university facilities and resources and provide them the opportunity to interact with each other, advisors, and faculty. The seminars are co-facilitated by a peer advisor and a professional academic advisor. The peer advisor is usually an upper-division student in the same major or college as the FIG for which he or she is responsible. The peer advisors, or FIG mentors, as they are more commonly called, are selected each spring for FIGs the following fall semester. The mentors participate in a rigorous selection process in which they must demonstrate problem-solving skills, familiarity with campus resources, a desire to help new students and classroom presentation skills in a three-part interview. Mentor candidates are evaluated by the staff in the FIG office, academic advisors in each college and by current FIG mentors. Although candidates are frequently students who have participated in the FIG program, participation is not required. Mentors participate in mandatory training in both the spring and summer, totaling approximately 45 hours. FIG mentors receive training in diversity awareness, classroom dynamics, group facilitation, communication skills, campus resources and seminar planning from the FIG program staff and other

campus experts. FIG mentors receive a semester stipend for their work - $300 for new mentors; $500 for returning mentors.

Advisors in each college are selected to participate in the program by their dean or associate dean for student affairs. Advisors attend similar training sessions in the summer, although training is not mandatory. The FIG seminar is seen by the colleges as an extension of developmental academic advising, because it gives advisors an opportunity to get to know a small group of their advisees. The seminar focuses on academic, developmental and social transitions of the student, so advisors have an opportunity to approach more holistically the advising of their students. Advisors are not additionally compensated for facilitating FIG seminars.

Nothing additional is required of faculty who teach courses designated for FIGs; however, they are invited to social occasions with the FIG students and mentors, and often participate in weekly seminar sessions. Not all faculty choose to attend the FIG seminar, but those who do have made positive reports on surveys and through emails about the opportunity to get to know their students outside of class. Some isolated attempts to integrate the curriculum among the courses in the cluster have been attempted by faculty, but the meaning making of the general education courses is largely the responsibility of the advisors and mentors. More than 400 course sections taught by more than 100 faculty members are included in the program. Faculty have some influence on the courses selected, although cluster formation is largely the responsibility of academic advisors and student affairs deans in each college.

Program Procedures

As discussed earlier, FIG clusters are designed by academic advisors in the colleges who select the course combinations and seminar times for each cluster. Courses included in the FIG program are usually general education requirements or specific introductory courses in various majors. Selection of courses occurs after the Course Schedule has been released for the fall semester. The FIG office staff coordinates with departments to secure seats in the existing courses.

Students learn about the FIG program in many ways. The program relies upon a combination of word-of-mouth and written documents to spread the message about FIGs. Alumni of the program, their friends and parents, and high school counselors are all an important part of recruiting students to the program.

First, many students are introduced to the program during their application and admission process. All admission counselors are trained to give information about the program to incoming students and the FIG office routinely participates in recruiting efforts including Longhorn Saturday and Longhorn-for-a-day. Prospective students may also learn about the program when visiting with an academic advisor or representative from the Division of Housing and Food Service. The staff from the FIG office also speak to the yearly high school counselor colloquium to update Texas high school counselors on the program. Finally, former FIG program participants also assist the program publicity efforts by speaking to prospective students, especially from their hometown.

Regardless of whether or not a student has been exposed to the FIG program during the admission process, all students who attend summer and fall orientation receive a FIG program brochure during their college meeting.

During this meeting, students gather according to their academic college to learn more about advising, registration and policies within their college. Academic advisors highlight the FIG program offerings within the college and share information with students about eligibility. The FIG program was designed to meet the needs of the "average" student at the University. Recognizing that programs already existed to help students deemed 'at-risk' and those in honors programs, the FIG program seeks to assist the middle 80% of students at the University. These students have neither an honors academic profile, nor does their academic profile suggest risk; instead these students fall within the average of SAT ranges and class rank. Students who participate in at-risk retention programs such as Gateway, TIP, and Connexus and those in honors programs are not eligible for the FIG program. A description of these programs is available in Appendix H.

Interested and eligible students self-select into the program. Students must meet with an academic advisor in their college to register for the program. Advisors discuss the program and review the students' plans for an academic major, as well as their credit-by-exam scores to determine eligibility for each FIG. Students may not enroll in a FIG if they do not meet the prerequisite for all courses in the cluster. If approved to enroll, students register for the three academic courses and the FIG seminar using a pseudo-unique number that is electronically linked to the actual unique numbers of the courses. At The University of Texas at Austin, each individual class section is identified by a five-digit 'unique number'. This number is used by students to register for a course. A pseudo-unique number, then, does not refer to a single class, but to the entire FIG cluster of courses and does not appear in the Course Schedule. Students

only receive the FIG's pseudo-unique when authorized to enroll in the cluster by their advisor. By entering this pseudo-unique number on the Telephone Enrollment Exchange (TEX), students are able to enroll simultaneously in the three courses in the FIG and the seminar. FIG registration takes place on TEX during Summer Orientation and Fall Registration. The 20 spaces are allotted throughout the course of registration periods, so that students in each orientation session have an opportunity to enroll in a FIG cluster. In the event that more students wish to enroll in a particular FIG than there are available seats, names are randomly drawn to determine who gets the seats. Students are encouraged to select their second choice cluster if their primary choice is full.

FIG Seminar

During the fall semester, FIG seminars begin meeting the first week of class. As mentioned above, the weekly seminars are designed and facilitated by the peer mentors and professional advisors. Each pair is trained by the FIG office on a variety of topics related to first-year student transition. The pair is responsible for following a standard syllabus format for presenting their information, but is allowed flexibility in determining each class session. Even with the flexibility afforded each FIG, most seminars cover the same topics including: time management, study strategies, getting to know your professors, campus traditions and history, career exploration and special interest tours. Additionally, the FIG program collaborates with most of the units within the Division of Student Affairs to provide seminar sessions and services to FIG students. Those areas include the Dean of Students Office, the Student Health Center, the Counseling and Mental Health Center, the International Office, the

Division of Recreational Sports, UT Learning Center and the Career Exploration Center. Offices outside of student affairs, such as the University of Texas Police Department and Undergraduate Writing Center, also collaborate with FIGS to offer seminar programs.

The pairs are encouraged to incorporate the core values of the institution into their seminar topics, insuring that a balance of academic, social and developmental sessions is presented. The seminar seeks to help students make meaning of their cluster courses and build community. But, the seminar also seeks to connect the curricular and co-curricular experiences of students by combining seminar topics on academic, developmental and social topics. Schroeder and Hurst (1996) suggest this model, reflective of a spirit of collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs, as ideal because it incorporates multiple core conditions of optimal learning environments. The FIG office also provides $100 to each FIG for expenses, usually stemming from social activities. Sample FIG seminar outlines are included in Appendix A.

Program Statistics

The FIG program at the University of Texas at Austin began in the fall of 1998. As Table 1 illustrates, the program began in only four academic colleges, but rapidly expanded to include all undergraduate colleges. The number of FIGs offered and the number of students in the program has steadily increased each year of the program. Additionally, a residential component of the program was added in 2000. Students in all colleges may choose to participate in the residential FIG program. Students in Residential FIGS are part of a FIG and live together in Whitis Courts residence hall.

Table 1: Profile of the Freshman Interest Group Program

	1998	**1999**	**2000**	**2001**	**2002**
Number of FIGs	29	52	105	114	108
Colleges Participa-ting	4	7	10	10	10
Students Enrolled	494	1003	1581	2280	2747

As mentioned previously, the FIG program was created to meet the needs of the UT student not already identified by an at-risk or honors program. The profile of the FIG student follows closely the averages of the UT class, as demonstrated in Table 2 below.

Table 2: SAT scores of FIG and non-FIG students at the University of Texas at Austin

	1998	**1999**	**2000**	**2001**	**2002**
FIGs	1191	1251	1199	1206	1217
Non-FIGs	1222	1216	1225	1228	1229

At the time of the study, the FIG Program was expanding in new directions to meet the needs of UT freshmen. A program designed to meet the needs of summer freshman admits (those students who applied for fall admission but were forced to enroll in the preceding summer semester) was piloted in 2002 and repeated in 2003. Because the admission process for the students and the composition of the program varied in the summer, those students were not included as part of this study. Additionally, the FIG office has expanded the traditional FIG model to include transfer students. Because the program elements differ between transfer and freshman students, transfer students were not included in this study.

The FIG program is evaluated in several ways. Students in each FIG are asked to complete several surveys. The first survey, part of the Course Instructor Survey, asks students several questions regarding their satisfaction with the program, their peer mentor, and professional advisor. A Course-Instructor Survey is UT-Austin's standard survey format administered to students at the end of every course each semester. A copy of the survey appears in Appendix B.

This survey includes common questions for all courses at the university, but may also include department or college specific questions. Although many of those questions are scantron-bubble response, the form allows for free response to questions about the most and least valuable aspects of being in a FIG. Additional questions allow the student to comment on the combinations of courses and make recommendations for further improvements. Students are also asked to rate each weekly seminar activity. Additional evaluation of the program comes individually from the peer mentors and the professional advisors. Faculty who teach courses included in the program are also surveyed.

Benefits of Learning Communities

The FIG program at UT-Austin, like many learning communities, has had a significant impact on retention rates. Since the FIG program began at UT-Austin, the first-to-second year retention rate has risen from 86% to 92% (The University of Texas at Austin, 2002). The success of the FIG program can also be measured by examining grade point average (GPA) data. Since the FIG program began, FIG students have significantly outperformed non-FIG students in their first-semester GPA (The University of Texas at Austin, 2002). This is true across all colleges and all SAT ranges, suggesting that participation in a FIG is beneficial regardless of pre-college characteristics. With 99% of FIG students reporting that they "would recommend a FIG to an incoming freshman," (The University of Texas at Austin, 2002) the success of the program is well-grounded.

The success of learning communities, especially FIGs, in improving retention rates is well documented, not only in assessment reports, but also in the rapid adoption of this model by other institutions (Gabelnick, MacGregor,

Matthews & Smith, 1990; Love & Tokuno, 1999). In addition to the financial, regulatory, and philosophical benefits that come to an institution as a result of increased retention rates, learning communities contribute to colleges and universities in other ways. Love (1999) identifies several ways in which learning communities benefit college communities including

> (1) providing an opportunity to integrate courses in an interdisciplinary manner;
>
> (2) helping students form social networks among their peers;
>
> (3) increasing student involvement;
>
> (4) providing opportunities for faculty development;
>
> (5) shifting the focus to student learning outcomes;
>
> (6) allowing educators to rethink the ways in which students are taught; and
>
> (7) becoming a lens through which the experiences of students at a particular college can be understood (p.3-4).

Student Perspective in Research

Much of what we know about the success of learning communities is a result of quantitative research. The National Learning Community Project website alone contains more than 100 references to quantitative research on learning community effectiveness (http://learningcommons.evergreen.edu/).

Of particular interest are Tinto, Goodsell-Love and Russo's (1993) study of the University of Washington FIG program and the University of Missouri's report *A student success story: FIGs at the University of Missouri-Columbia* (1996). Both studies report significant differences in retention rates and grade point

averages for FIG participants versus non-FIG students. As large, public, research institutions similar to The University of Texas at Austin, their reports further support the effectiveness of FIG programs at improving retention. Research demonstrating an increase in retention rates tells us that a program is working, but reveals very little about how or why a program works. Differences in grade point averages between learning community participants and non-participants suggest student success in a course, but do little to explain the causes of the difference, other than the program intervention. What characteristics of the program intervention make the difference? Are students in the learning community more comfortable with the subject material as a result of their paired course structure? Have students in the learning community spent more time in group study as a result of feeling comfortable with their social integration? These types of questions can more adequately be addressed through qualitative methods.

Although several retention and learning community researchers have advocated for the use of qualitative methods (Astin, 1996; Love, 1993; Manning, 1999; Tinto, 1993) there remains little qualitative research in this area. Most qualitative research focuses on student attitudes and expectations about the first-year (Ketcheson & Levine, 1999). This research has been useful in confirming our understanding of the first-year experience and learning communities, but does little to help us understand the nature of the learning community itself and its effect on the student experience. Because "within learning communities, students are recognized not only as learners but also as knowers" (Rendon, 1997 as cited in Ketcheson & Levine, 1999), it is important for students to share their

knowledge and experience with learning communities with researchers. The methods for doing that will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter outlines much of what we know about learning communities and their impact on student retention. While learning communities have proven successful in raising retention rates, very little is known about the essence of the student experience while participating in a learning community. The essence of experience is what qualitative researchers seek to capture.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

What is the essence of the experience of participating in a Freshman Interest Group (FIG) at the University of Texas at Austin? Are there specific elements of the program that shape the experience as a participant? By examining student responses to program evaluations, this study seeks to uncover the FIG experience and to contribute to the body of knowledge on student experiences within learning communities. What is the voice of the students, the emic perspectives, on the Freshman Interest Group (FIG) experience?

THE METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Qualitative research methods seek to understand, explore and probe the human experience as it relates to the subject being studied (Berg, 2001; Glesne, 1999; Patton, 1990, 2002). The research methods focus on representing the voice

of the participants, using words and rich description, rather than numbers. Data collection methods typically associated with qualitative research include interviews, focus groups and document analysis (Berg, 2001; Glesne, 1999; Patton, 1990, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1997). As discussed above, an advantage of qualitative research, especially when studying college students, is the ability to seek answers to questions that traditional quantitative analysis cannot answer. While quantitative research typically answers "how many" questions, qualitative research can be useful in answering "why" questions.

The nature of the FIG program lends itself well to qualitative methods, especially given the diversity of student experiences within the program. Additionally, Patton (1990) identifies three justifications for the use of qualitative analysis when studying specific programs

> (1) Qualitative results can help externals understand a program operation;
>
> (2) Qualitative methods are useful for dissemination and replication of model interventions worthy of replication;
>
> - By describing and understanding the dynamics of program processes, it is possible to isolate critical elements that have contributed to a program's successes and failures (p. 95).

The importance of Patton's third point is worth highlighting: understanding the elements of the FIG program that shape the student experience can have a profound impact on future programming efforts at The University of Texas at Austin and other institutions. While there are common elements among all learning communities, isolating critical elements, as Patton suggests, may assist in future program development.

Because this study seeks to understand if elements of the program process shape the student experience, qualitative methods are particularly important. Patton (1990) outlines the benefits of using qualitative methods for studying programs:

- depicting process requires detailed description
- the experience of a process typically varies for different people
- the process is fluid and dynamic
- participants' perceptions are a key process consideration (p.95).

No outline of qualitative methods is complete without a discussion of the ways in which data are analyzed. Regardless of the philosophical or theoretical tradition in which the qualitative method is grounded, most research follows the same basic format. Data collected are analyzed using three types of coding procedures: open, axial and selective coding. Open coding, usually done at the beginning of analysis, seeks to categorize data by labeling individual phenomenon (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Categories are formed and organized around the central research questions. In the second stage, axial coding, causal, intervening and contextual factors are examined and categorized (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Again, careful attention is paid to the data as they are re-examined by coding categories in relation to each other. Finally, selective coding involves identifying key elements and categories. "Identifying the story is a key aspect in formulating the grounded theory. The story assists in locating the most salient aspects of the data and turning them into general, descriptive sentences" (Brown, Stevens, Troiano & Schneider, 2002, p. 178). The data are then mapped out narratively, usually in smaller categories capable of revealing information to the researcher. Qualitative methods have the ability to produce rich data,

capable of illuminating the human condition or experience and are therefore ideal when studying the Freshman Interest Group program.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

Content analysis involves looking at written data to explore how words, ideas and themes relate to the subject being studied. More specifically, content analysis involves "making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying special characteristics of messages" (Berg, 2001, p.240). A great debate exists among researchers as to whether or not content analysis is a qualitative or a quantitative methodology. There are elements of content analysis rooted deeply in qualitative tradition, including the identification of patterns and relationships (Abrahamson, 1983; Berg, 2001). Similarly, there are also elements of content analysis that more closely follow the methods of quantitative research, including counting, identification and indexing (Berg, 2001; Silverman, 1993). Since both research and methodological camps claim this technique, it seems logical to apply both a qualitative and quantitative philosophy to content analysis data collection. Accordingly, this research seeks to blend the two traditions, using content analysis, to bring a greater understanding to the research question.

Berg (2001) supports the specific use of content analysis to examine responses to open-ended questions, as in survey data. He suggests that the use of open-ended surveys can yield important numerical and narrative data. Although qualitative research is usually considered obtrusive, in that researchers must interact with individuals or groups in person to collect their data, content analysis allows for a more unobtrusive examination of the data (Berg, 2001). Marshall and Rossman (1995) also support the use of document analysis,

specifically survey data, suggesting that it is "rich in portraying the values and beliefs of participants in the setting (p.85).

EVALUATION CRITERIA AND PROCEDURAL TOOLS TO ENSURE QUALITY

It is important for any research project to follow established protocols for quality. Ensuring research is conducted following quality protocols not only increases the legitimacy of the research findings, it allows other researchers to understand and build upon conclusions reached. When evaluating research, it is important to assess the applicability, consistency and neutrality of the work (Glesne, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patten, 2002). Within quantitative research, applicability, consistency and neutrality are reflected in the positivist's paradigm of scientific research. Research conducted in this paradigm seeks methods for removing bias of the researcher, the data collection, and data analysis. But, qualitative research cannot be measured by the definitions of the positivist paradigm. Instead, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest four alternate constructs that most closely match the assumptions of qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Following is an examination of those constructs within this research.

Credibility

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that credibility is the degree to which the subject being studied is actually described and identified. This credibility is also frequently referred to as validity, the term that most closely matches the equivalent canon in quantitative research. Maxwell, (1996) offers a definition of

validity useful for this study, "The correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account" (p.87). Qualitative researchers are equally concerned about validity, but the methods for assessing validity are different, grounded in the nature of the data collected. It is important for those evaluating qualitative research to remember that "Validity is a goal, rather than a product" (Maxwell, 1996, p. 86). Because qualitative research rejects the notion that "Truth" can be obtained, validity is concerned with how results are interpreted. Researchers generally consider interpretive threats, that is, the degree to which the researcher imposes his or her own framework or meaning on the data, rather than attempting to understand the participants, to be the most serious (Maxwell, 1996; Patten, 2002; Patton, 1990, 2003). Researcher bias as a threat to validity can be examined through a process called triangulation.

Triangulation refers to the use of different methods or different points of view to examine the same data (Maxwell, 1996; Patten, 2002; Patton, 1990, 2003). One method of achieving triangulation is to discuss and review the research with other researchers or observers familiar with the phenomena being studied. For this study, three individuals agreed to assist in reviewing the data: the assistant coordinator of the FIG program; a staff member at the University who works directly with FIG students; and a faculty member at the University who studies student retention. During the coding phases, these individuals examined the data and discussed the results with the researcher. Differences and similarities in the coding process were examined to further refine the content analysis process.

A second method of triangulating the data seeks the assistance of program participants, often referred to as member checks (Patton, 2003). Because there is

no personally identifiable data on the surveys, it is impossible to have each individual check his or her responses against the researcher's interpretation, but it is possible to allow a sample of the population to examine the results. A focus group is an ideal strategy for member checking, because it allows the participants to review the interpretation results and comment (Maxwell, 1996; Patton, 1990, 2003). For the purposes of this study, a focus group was convened after the data were examined. All currently enrolled students who participated in the FIG program were sent an email inviting them to participate in the focus group. There are no strict rules for determining the size of a focus group, although groups between 10-15 are usually considered ideal (Patton, 1990, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). From the responses to the email, participants from all colleges were randomly selected to participate. During the focus groups, the results of the research were presented and students were asked to respond to the research question "What elements of the FIG Program had the most impact on your experience and why?" Responses of the focus groups were transcribed and analyzed as the final element of triangulation to determine if the student participants agreed with the survey results.

Transferability

Transferability is understood as the degree to which a study's findings can be applied to other settings. Marshall and Rossman (1995) suggest "the burden of demonstrating the applicability of one set of findings to another context rests more with the investigator who would make that transfer than to the original investigator" (p.143). Because qualitative research seeks to represent the voice of the participants, it is important to understand that some elements are simply not

transferable. However, by grounding the research in theory and data, other researchers may understand the context in which the research was conducted. Another strategy for ensuring transferability is sampling. It is important for all types of research to follow standards of sampling. Given the size of the survey data available, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which different researchers approach sampling. Quantitative researchers who are unable to examine an entire population, for reasons of size or practicality, seek out methods of sampling to achieve appropriate representation. When using large groups, as in the case of the data available on the FIG program, researchers consult a list of recommended sample sizes. This list helps researchers determine the point at which larger sizes may experience diminishing returns, that is, the point at which additional data have little influence on the results (Patten, 2002). Tables of estimated sample size usually seek to keep the error down to less than 5%, meaning "the true percentage in the whole population should fall within 5% of the percentage that we obtain from the sample" (Patten, 2002, p.49). Drawing upon the sample size table in Patten (2002), the recommended sample size for the 5000 responses of the FIG program is 357. However, it is impossible to predict in advance of any qualitative research, the total number of responses that will be considered. In qualitative research, sampling occurs until a subject has been studied to the point of redundancy or when no new themes emerge (Patton, 1990, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). There are no rules for the size of the sample, but qualitative samples are smaller than those considered by quantitative researchers.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the degree to which the findings could be replicated by another researcher with the same participants in the same setting (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). This notion of reliability is a hallmark of the quantitative tradition. While qualitative researchers must use quality research techniques that are generally understood by all researchers, it is important to note the fundamental difference in the approach to reliability by the different paradigms

> Positivist notions of reliability assume an unchanging universe where inquiry could, quite logically, be replicated. The assumption of an unchanging social world is in direct contrast to the constructed, and the concept of replication is itself problematic (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p.145).

Confirmability

A positivist paradigm seeks objectivity – the removal of bias from the research. Confirmability rejects the notion of bias-free research, but demands of qualitative researchers that the data support the findings of another researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Put another way, "they remove evaluation from some inherent characteristic of the researcher (objectivity) and place it squarely on the data themselves" (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p.145). One benefit of using content analysis on survey data is that the responses are captured in time, and the words on the paper are not likely to change. To help insure that the conclusions the data support are confirmable, this study employed triangulation techniques including peer review and the focus group as described earlier.

DESCRIPTION OF STUDY

Data Collection

The data used for this study were collected as part of an end-of-semester course-instructor survey. For each of the five years (1998-2002) for which data are available, this survey was administered to students in the FIG program. As with other course-instructor surveys at The University of Texas at Austin, this evaluation was administered to students in the weekly FIG seminar course during the last two weeks of the semester. An envelope containing the survey and pencils was picked up in the Freshman Interest Group (FIG) office prior to administration. A student volunteer then administered the survey following written instructions provided. The survey included 32 questions to which the student responded by bubbling the appropriate circle, most utilizing a Likert scale. An additional seven questions on the reverse of the form were included. These short-answer questions provided the student an opportunity to use his or her own words to evaluate the program experience. Students were asked to reflect upon "the most valuable aspect of being in a FIG" in addition to other questions about changes to the program, commentary on the course cluster and reflections about the advisor and peer mentor. Upon completion, the forms were returned to the FIG office in a sealed envelope and then forwarded to the Measurement and Evaluation Center on campus for processing. Copies of the forms were returned to the FIG office at the end of the semester. See Appendix B for an example.

The mean return rate of the surveys was 81%. This rate was calculated by examining the number of students enrolled in the program and the number of

surveys returned. It is important to note that only students who were present at the FIG seminar on the day of the survey administration filled out the forms. The experiences of students who did not attend the last class day were not considered in this study, but their exclusion raises important questions for future research; namely, were the experiences of those students different from those in this study?

Site Description

The University of Texas at Austin Freshman Interest Group (FIG) program was selected as the research site for multiple reasons. First, the success of the FIG program had previously been documented through improvements in retention and grade point averages of program participants.

Table 3: Grade Point Averages of FIG Program Participants

	1998	1999	2000	2001
FIG	2.97	2.86	2.99	2.99
Non-FIG	2.95	2.81	2.89	2.80

As a successful site, additional information about the qualities of a successful program could be studied in more detail. Secondly, the program's size (5000 students in its history) provided opportunities for deep and rich understanding of multiple perspectives on the program. Thirdly, the size and profile of the institution, combined with its relatively low attrition rate (8%) made it ideal for

study. Tinto (1993) suggests that student departure from highly selective institutions is enigmatic, given student pre-college characteristics and the drive to be admitted. For the same reason, Berger and Braxton (1998) suggest researching retention in low attrition environments because of the extensive body of research conducted at schools with high attrition rates. Similarly, the size of the institution in the country (52,000 students) and its status as the largest single-campus institution made it ideal for research. Berger and Braxton (1999) argue that "any theoretical model can be informed by examining what occurs at extreme ends of the behavioral spectrum" (p. 106).

Data Collection and Analysis Process

When using content analysis, it is essential to determine at what level the data will be examined. For the purposes of this study, the data from the short answer responses to the prompt "The most valuable part of being in a FIG was" were examined. Most of the responses to this prompt were in the form of one or two words or phrases, a few complete sentences also appeared. Although researchers may sometimes select a particular level of evaluation, all responses to the prompt were considered. Within each response, it is possible to examine the written messages using seven major elements: words, themes, characters, paragraphs, items, concepts and semantics (Berg, 2001). For the purposes of this research, data were analyzed using a combination of three elements: words, themes, and concepts. At the simplest level of analysis, words can be counted, although Berg (2001) suggests that themes are more useful to analyze because they reveal more than just a frequency count. As words and theme cluster together "into conceptual clusters or ideas" (Berg, 2001, p.247) they become

concepts. Concept analysis allows the reading to be extended beyond mere counting, also known as manifest content, to an interpretive reading of the meaning conveyed by the data, known as latent content. Berg (2001) and Abrahamson (1983) suggest combining the elements of analysis in the various stages of qualitative inductive analysis. After the initial open coding in which words, themes and concepts are examined and a general sorting begins, coding frames are used as a framework for axial coding. In true qualitative research, axial coding involves inductively seeking out the themes that emerge (Glesne, 1999; Patton, 1990, 2003; Strauss & Corbin,). The nature of content analysis suggests developing coding frames using a theoretical framework. These frames should emerge from an initial coding of the data and from the researcher's own knowledge of theory, but are not fixed (Berg, 2001). Tinto and Astin's theoretical frameworks of integration and involvement served as the foundation for the development of coding frames. Finally, data are selectively coded to seek out the final categories of analysis. The words, themes and concepts can be interpreted narratively, as in a qualitative tradition, to yield information, or can be represented in a frequency, as in a quantitative method. This study did both. By examining the same data using content analysis, the results can be presented in ways that represent the student experience to a variety of audiences. It is important to recognize that in order for this research to assist other universities in understanding learning communities, research must be presented in ways that appeal to the research beliefs of different individuals. For some, the emergence of descriptive statistics can illuminate the student experience, while others learn more from the representation of student responses.

Following the process described above, I first organized the data by year and then section by college. Because some colleges have more program participants than others, I equally examined all colleges while seeking saturation of the data. I took a form from the stack, examined the response to the question and examined the response at the word, theme, and concept level described above. In this first stage (open coding), all ideas were given a label by noting the words on an index card. Colored cards represented each of the academic colleges participating in the program, and the year of the response was also indicated in the card. This process was repeated with all of the data in the stack until redundancy occurred. Given the abundance of data available, I considered a theme to be redundant when it appeared at least 10 times. Additionally, each card was then sorted into stacks according to the label given. At this point, it was possible that some ideas were similarly coded, but there is no expectation of this. Those labels were then transferred to the white board in my home office so that they could be examined and classified by similar properties.

At the second stage, axial coding, coding frames were introduced. First, I examined the labels in search of similar properties. Those labels were then grouped, classified and organized. New category labels or frames were then created to more succinctly express what the group of labels represents. Again, this process involved sorting of labels and categories on my white board. Corresponding stacks were grouped together and labeled according to the coding frame to which they were assigned. During this process, my peer reviewers will be invited to examine the labels and coding frames. Categories and frames were examined and reexamined until my peer reviewers and I were comfortable with the data. It is important for the categorical frames and their

corresponding elements to be counted at this phase of the analysis for the purposes of descriptive statistics.

In the final stage, selective coding, the frames and their corresponding elements were re-examined in search of a 'story line', as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990). The story line is the essence of the experience; the way in which an outside observer can understand the experience of the participant and make sense of the connection between the categories. Although descriptive statistics are offered, the selective coding procedure expands upon the information merely gathered in content analysis and gives it the heart and soul – the voice of the FIG experience. The ultimate goal of this research was to present the story of the FIG experience. By connecting the story line to specific program elements, this research can help administrators understand the learning community.

Limitations

Several challenges face researchers when undertaking studies to learn more about retention, including access to student information and space and time limitations. Similarly, this dissertation faced some limitations. First, while researching at a single-campus can provide valuable information, it can also limit the transferability of the research to other campuses. Second, as the director of the program being studied, I must acknowledge that no research is bias free and that there remains a possible impact on data interpretation. However, I argue that my involvement with the program qualified me to represent the emic experience of the students and that my understanding of the program only enhanced the data analysis. Third, the nature of qualitative research in which the

researcher interprets information leaves open the possibility of alternative interpretations of the data, although the triangulation process seeks to minimize this effect. Finally, the size of the program and the available data made interpretation of each survey impractical. Critics argue that researching at one's own institution is perilous (Jones, 2002). Conversely, I argue that only through my intimate understanding of the program can the understanding of the student experience be represented truly. Having been involved with the program throughout its initial inception, this researcher was well equipped to examine all areas of the program, both positive and negative. This study addresses the challenge of prolonged engagement and trust, two factors critical in successful qualitative research, (Jones, 2002) because I am uniquely familiar with the program and its students. A key element of this methodology is an understanding that the researcher "is viewed as the instrument through which data collection and analysis are conducted" (Brown, Stevens, Troiano & Schneider, 2002, p. 175). The researcher must be aware of subtleties of the data and explore meanings and assumptions about the data. A keen awareness of the program enhances this perspective. I am aware, however, of my own biases as a researcher. While it is impossible to remove all bias of researchers, it is important to acknowledge the perspective and assumptions that one brings to their research. I am eager to uncover more about the program and am prepared to report both negative and positive aspects of FIG participation. Peer reviewers and the triangulation process can also help uncover bias. These considerations, while they do not entirely remove the power positions between researcher and respondent, can help insure the validity of the process.

SUMMARY

This study used content analysis as a means for conducting the research. Because this method has ties to both qualitative and quantitative paradigms, both inductive analysis and descriptive statistics were used to examine the phenomena being studied. Sampling and validity checks employed protocols used in both paradigms of research. This type of research has the potential to help the researcher uncover multiple perspectives on the research subject.

In Chapter 4, the data are presented with the reader, as they are examined during the coding process. Categories, labels and the initial story line are presented. Chapter 5 examines the resulting story line and makes connections to the programmatic elements of the learning community. Chapter 6 provides the reader with conclusions, implications for those studying retention and learning communities, as well as recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

INTRODUCTION

The findings in this study emerged from a process involving the examination of survey data, peer review of the data and focus groups of student participants. The nature of qualitative research is such that data collection and analysis occur virtually simultaneously, that is, the nature of constantly comparing and seeking out explanations occurs throughout the research project.

The guiding questions as the data were coded and analyzed were:

- What is the voice of the student participant in the FIG program?
- In what ways are these separate voices connected by a shared experience?

In order to maintain the trustworthiness, credibility, and study design previously described in Chapter 3, member checking, peer review and debriefing was carried out.

DESCRIPTION OF THE CODING AND ANALYSIS

The data for this research came from The University of Texas at Austin Course-Instructor Surveys from the Freshman Interest Group Program years 1998-2002. To begin the first phase of the coding, as described in Chapter 3, each year's surveys were separated and only one year was examined in a single coding session. Although this research sought to represent the student voice of

participating in the FIG program across all years, it was important to examine each year's data separately to understand trends and patterns that might emerge or might affect results during the growth of the program. Two concerns emerged that necessitated the evaluation of each year's data individually. First, since not all colleges were represented in each year of the program, it was important to consider the year's responses in their own context. Secondly, given the possibility that campus and program policy changes as well as world events might affect student perceptions of their participation, separate year analysis was essential.

Using the content analysis procedure described in Chapter 3, I examined each survey individually, specifically the prompt "the most valuable part of being in a FIG was." Student responses to that prompt were then given a label and transferred to a notecard. Each notecard contained the year of the response and was color coded to represent the college in which the student was enrolled. Each survey was examined and a new card and label created, until saturation of a thought or idea was found. I determined a label and thought it to be saturated when I found at least 10 similar responses in a single college. Examples of label names were friends, meeting people, small classes, food, etc. When saturation was reached, I no longer made a new card. This initial process, described by Strauss and Corbin (1990) as open coding, served as the foundation for the data collection and analysis process. This process was repeated for each year 1998-2002.

Although open coding was done by academic year, I resisted the urge to further code the data within the academic year. In order to truly represent the emic perspective of participating in a FIG, it was important to understand the

common voices that emerged throughout the program. Within-year cards were counted and examined, but remained together only through the initial open coding phase.

The second phase of the collection and analysis, axial coding, involved the development of coding frames. Those coding frames are described by Berg (2001) as units that contained subcategories that emerged during the open coding process. At this point, all cards from all years were combined into one pile to begin the axial coding process. Using the floor of my study as the canvas, I would re-read each card and place it onto the floor, making piles of similar thoughts or ideas. With a total number of cards exceeding 800, I initially concentrated on combining cards of ideas that had been saturated, and quickly discovered that many of the same ideas had become saturated within multiple years. The saturated categories remained fresh in my mind throughout the analysis process, so the other cards were simply put into a separate pile until the grouping of the saturated piles was complete. I then reexamined the cards that did not initially meet the criteria of saturation. Each card was reviewed and given its own space on the floor. If another card in the pile emerged with a similar label, the cards were placed together. If a "matching" card was not found, the card received its own place on the floor. Following the protocol of content analysis, most of the data were placed together only if there was a direct match of the words on the cards. This process yielded more than 200 separate piles, some containing only a single card, others with multiple cards. Physically standing back and examining the piles of cards on the floor quickly reinforced the need for additional coding.

The second element of coding frequently used within a content analysis method is theme (Berg, 2001). In this phase, several of the single cards, and some of the smaller piles of grouped cards were examined for similar themes. In this phase, cards with similar themes were grouped together, without regard to word-for-word matching of the labels. For instance, "meeting teachers," "getting to know profs," and "becoming familiar with faculty" were all combined to form a new category, labeled "professors." It is important to note that during this process, cards were combined and examined in multiple ways, including moving cards between categories and re-reading cards within a category, before a new label was generated. Finally, using the last element of content analysis, the newly created categories were reexamined to see if words and themes created concepts. Berg (2001) describes concepts as "words grouped together into conceptual clusters (ideas) that constitute, in some instances, variables in a typical research hypothesis"(p. 247). Concepts can also be defined as the whole message of the sender. Again, piles of cards were re-read and reshuffled as concepts emerged and new concepts were again given a label. This final stage of axial coding yielded 82 total categories.

The third stage of coding in this study was selective coding. This coding method was used to relate the theoretical background to the categories that emerged, to interpret then validate the relationships between categories. Tinto (1993) and Astin's (1984) theories were reviewed to help provide a foundation against which the data would be compared. Additionally, the relationships between elements in the FIG program were also examined. At this stage, the researcher's own familiarity with the program was a strength in this phase of coding because of the complexity of the program. An intimate understanding of

the FIG recruitment, enrollment, registration and participation process assisted in further honing the categories. As in other phases of coding, cards were reshuffled and new labels given as the grounded theory emerged. Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe the steps to selective coding including uncovering a story, relating categories to a core theme or idea, relating categories and to look for areas to be refined by further work. By relating categories to one another and to the central theme of understanding the FIG student experience, the final labels and stacks of cards emerged.

As an element of the trustworthiness process, additional researchers were invited to examine the cards and categories at this time. These researchers, or peer reviewers, included the assistant coordinator of the FIG program, the director of advising and FIG coordinator for a large college, and a faculty member in the School of Nursing familiar with the FIG program and with retention research. Each peer reviewer was invited to examine the cards and categories. This form of triangulation confirmed the connections and labels I had made and refined categories as needed. In the end, a group of 53 categories emerged from the original 804 cards created from the survey data. A complete listing of the categories appears in Appendix C. For illustrative purposes, the information for the category "Food" follows.

Food (18 cards total)

1998 – 1 card	Engineering
1999 – 1 card	Communication
2000 – 8 cards	6 – Engineering; 1 – Natural Sciences; 1 - Communication
2001 – 3 cards	2 – Engineering; 1 - Business
2002 – 5 cards	1 – Social Work; 1 – Communication; 2 – Engineering; 1 – Natural Sciences

Examples of cards: "food"; "eating pizza"; "doughnuts"; "free food"

INTERPRETATION OF THE DATA

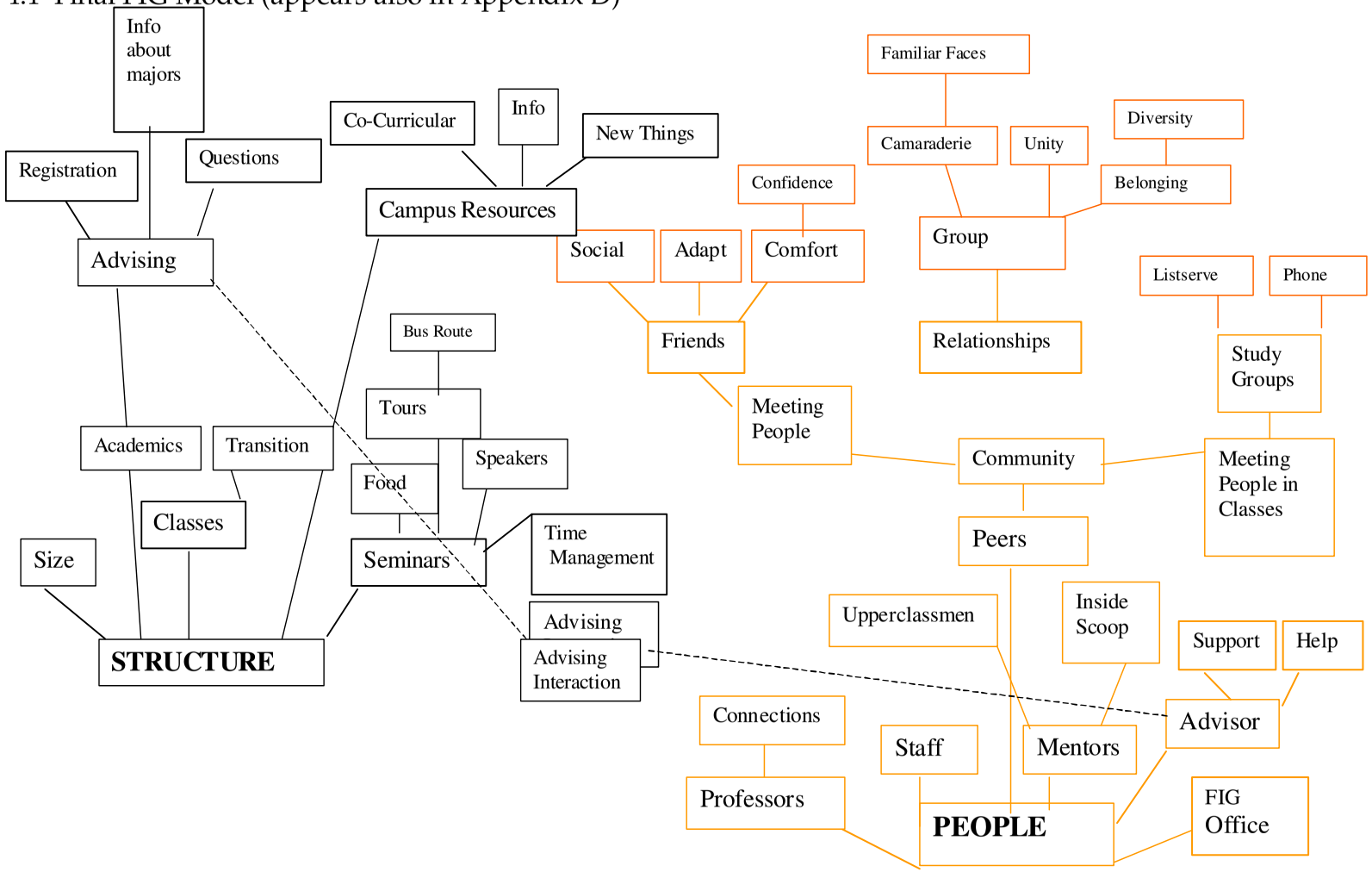
The emergence of the 53 categories from the initial 804 cards finally provided some structure and organization to the otherwise unwieldy task of examining student voice in the program. The categories that emerged were labeled and agreed upon by the peer reviewers familiar with the program. However, further refinement of the connections between and among the categories was necessary for a deeper understanding of the emic perspective of participating in a FIG. So begins the development of a model representing the research.

The development of the model relied upon the research of Astin, Tinto and learning community research to inform and shape. Tinto (1993) describes in his model of student departure the need for both social and academic integration into a learning community. By looking at the 53 categories on the floor, I could quickly identify categories that were more academic or more social in nature. Astin's research (1984) focuses on the involvement of an individual in the

learning process and describes the elements of successful involvement. Again, I was able to identify categories consistent with his model as described in Chapter 2. Most importantly, research on learning community models (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990) describe the need for both programmatic (policy and structural) organization as well as human intervention in successful learning communities.

It is important to include all categories in the model, not just the major ones, to insure that the voices of all participants are represented. As I began to develop the graphic representation of the model, as seen in Figure 4.1, the lines and boxes began to look like tree branches and leaves to me. In qualitative research, as these categories emerged, one supporting the next, levels developed. I soon began calling it the "FIG tree" because the visual of a tree was so powerful. The metaphor of a tree will be used throughout the explanation of the model as a way of simplifying the complex FIG experience.

Figure 4.1 Final FIG Model (appears also in Appendix D)



The model's development was a complex process of examining the cards, the piles that emerged after the final stage of coding. At the selective coding level, the categories were combined, renamed and the focus was narrowed or expanded to include all of the voices in the original 800+ cards. The titles of the categories were developed by the researcher and examined by peer reviewers. The model development began by re-examining all of the categories that developed, attempting to make sense or connections between them. Initially, I was struck by how the cards fell in to two distinct areas: those that dealt with the programmatic structure of the program and those that dealt with the people or individuals associated with the program. Many of the categories fell quickly into one of these two areas. The cards were tentatively sorted into piles representing these areas. A handful of stacks of cards remained. Those cards primarily represented feelings or emotions of the student participants. Because of the human nature of emotions, those cards were placed into the people category initially.

Structure

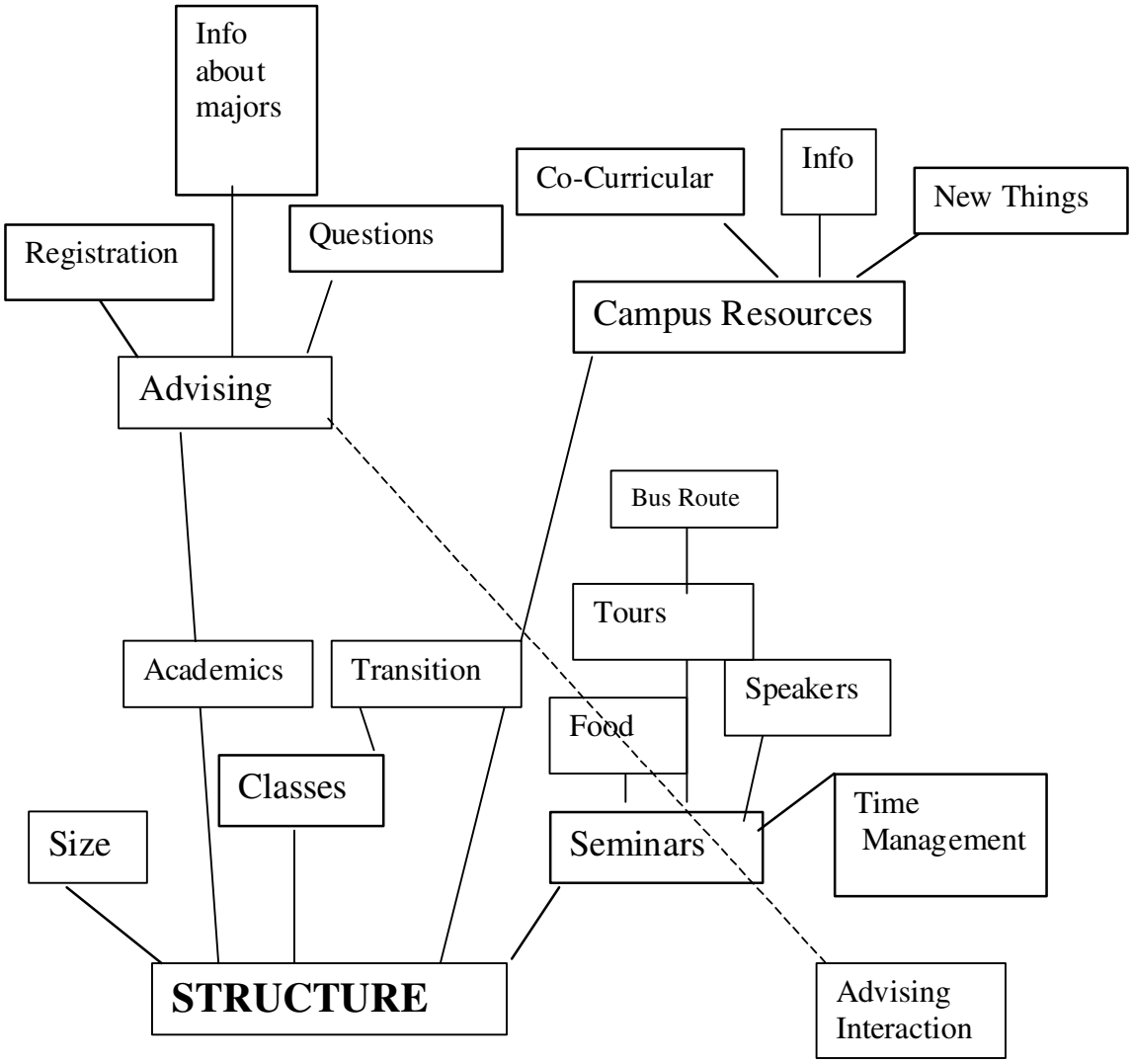
The second stage of model development relied heavily on the researcher's knowledge of the program. First, the category of items related to the structure of the FIG program, such as classes and seminars, was examined. At this stage, the cards were again reexamined and sorted by areas that were interrelated or connected. For instance, several smaller piles of cards described activities that typically occur in the FIG seminar. Food, speakers, tours and time management were all mentioned specifically by students. Because these items were known by

the researcher to be elements of activities in the FIG seminar, they were grouped with the larger stack of cards that simply described the FIG seminar in general. It was important at this stage of the model to resist the urge to combine all of the cards into one larger category – Seminars. But, an important element of qualitative research is representation of the voice of the participants. While some participants were general in their description, it was important not to negate the voice of the students for whom a specific item or topic was the most valuable part of their FIG experience.

The process of examining the stacks for interrelated topics was again repeated for all cards under the structure category. Campus resources, Advising and Classes were three additional sub-categories of the structure of the FIG program that yielded a position on the model. The final category, Size, was included under Structure with no additional or supporting sub-categories. This category represented cards that mainly spoke about the small size of the FIG clusters, not the size of the University as a whole.

Ultimately, the Structure portion of the model illustrated five major categories of FIG program elements and their supporting 13 categories, as seen in Figure 4.2. The meaning of the categories will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Figure 4.2 FIG Model – subsection Structure



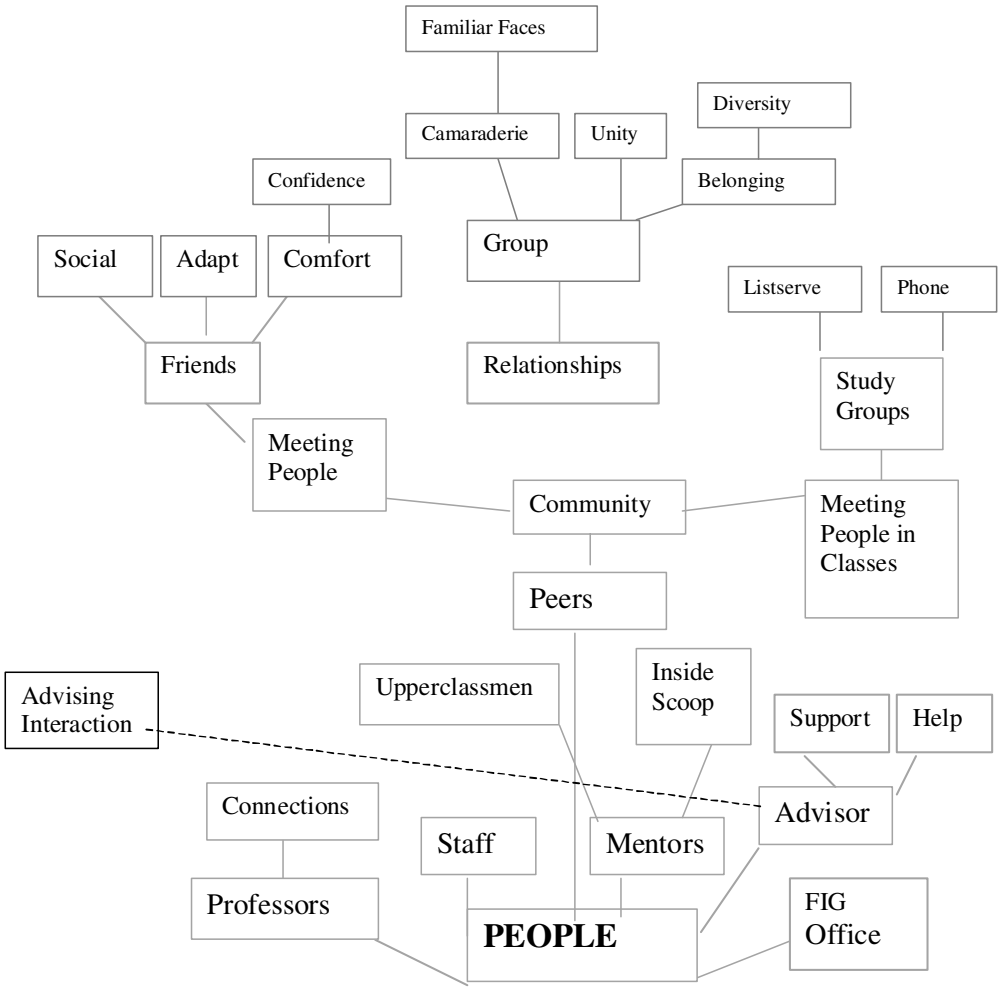
People

Similar to the category of Structure, the second phase of the model development involved looking for connections among and between the various

card piles placed into the People category. At this phase, reexamining all of the cards within a particular category was essential. Although the names of each category were designed to offer information about the contents, a more thorough re-reading of the meaning and connections on each card helped yield the connections seen on the model, especially where human emotions were concerned.

As the researcher, my knowledge of the program was an essential part of the model development, as connections between individuals and their roles within the program were explored. It was initially apparent to me that each individual involved with the program would likely be a separate sub-category of People, because I was familiar with the distinct nature of their role and responsibility within the FIG program. Broad categories like Staff and FIG Office emerged first, with no supporting cards beyond those in the initial category pile. Professors, Mentors and Advisors were each multiple stacks of cards, worthy of a distinct category separation. Peers, another broad category, seemed to encompass several areas in which the student participants had voiced an important role – as evidenced by the category topics discussed above. It made sense both logistically and semantically to have all of the main categories branching from People to be the names of categories of individuals associated with the program. The tree analogy proved useful in visualizing the extension of these individuals from the base, or trunk of the tree – People, into branches. After designating the individuals as the branches from people, the remaining card stacks were examined and re-read to yield the various subcategories and smaller branches, as shown in Figure 4.3.

Figure 4.3: FIG Model - Subsection People



As discussed previously, it was important at this stage of the research to resist the temptation to consolidate categories further in an attempt to make a clean model. The nature of the open, axial and selective coding process was designed to insure that the voices of all participants remained true. For instance, there were two categories that became branches of the Mentor category: Inside

Scoop and Upperclassmen. On a few of the cards in the Inside Scoop category, students mentioned "getting the inside scoop from a mentor" as the most valuable part of being in a FIG. While in the initial open coding phase, the temptation was to simply match the word "mentor" to other cards with that word, it became apparent in further stages of coding that the student's real message – "inside scoop" was of more importance than just the individual. Because of the connection between the individual and the action, the category became a smaller branch of Mentor. The same was true of the Upperclassmen category. The researcher was familiar with the requirement that all FIG mentors be upperclass students; accordingly, that category became a smaller branch of the initial Mentor category. This process of connection-making through a close examination of the cards was repeated until the initial branches of the main categories were complete.

The Peer category was the most challenging part of the model to develop. As was discussed above, several major categories of cards emerged from the initial coding processes. Many of these cards described student participant's feelings about their interaction or the value they placed on the connections made with other students in their FIGs. Meeting People, Meeting People in Classes, Friends, Study Groups and Community were all major categories that emerged from the survey data. In each case, survey and focus group participants described the connections made with other students, which I then labeled the category – Peers.

Ultimately, it seemed that a stronger sense of being part of a community emerged from interactions with peers. That sense of community was repeated not only in the cards that made up the category Community, but also in the

responses of the focus group participants. That community was, in turn, either largely academically based or socially based. The distinction between socially and academically-based community or connections was mirrored by the distinction between students of "meeting people" and "meeting people in classes." Once the initial distinction between academic and social was determined, I used my knowledge of the program, combined with a close reading of other categories to determine placement of other card categories within the model. The placement of these categories was later confirmed in the triangulation process.

The academic connections, linked by meeting people in classes, were further elaborated upon by the emergence of study groups and listserves and phone lists of classmates. From the student responses, the academic connection here was a very valuable part of the program: phone and listserves helped students form study groups; those study groups would not have developed if students had not met other students in their classes as a result of the FIG. And, ultimately, the students felt part of a larger academic community in which they shared their academic experience with peers.

The social connection branch of the peer model contained more cards (13 categories in all) than did the academic branch of the peer model (4 categories). Relationships and Friends were the two main by-products of meeting people. Because students met other people at the University, they described feelings of belonging to a group, having a sense of unity, camaraderie and of seeing familiar faces. Student participants described the confidence that emerged from feeling comfortable around new friends and the advantages that the social connections

made in their adaptation to the University community. Students felt part of a larger social community as a result of their interactions with their peers.

The final organization of units under each heading was informed by theory, practice, the researcher's understanding of the program and the ideas expressed by the student voices as represented by the cards. Although the cards were organized and grouped with unit labels at this point, all of the words, phrases, ideas and themes on the cards were reexamined to further highlight the connections between the categories. The final result was a model of the student perspective of the most valuable aspects of participating in the FIG program. This model, as seen in Appendix D, served as the foundation for the focus group conversations with FIG participants.

Focus Groups

The next phase of the research involved conducting focus groups of currently enrolled students who had participated in FIGs as freshmen. The purpose of the focus groups was to elaborate on the responses found in the survey coding and to triangulate the assumptions and connections that I made with the thoughts and opinions of students. An email invitation was sent to randomly-generated lists of students who had participated in the FIG program and who were currently enrolled at The University of Texas at Austin. The email invited students to participate in a 1.5 hour audiotaped focus group to discuss their perceptions of participating in the FIG program. A copy of the email invitation appears in Appendix E. Several focus group times were offered to students. Initially, attempts were made to restrict student participation at a particular time according to the college in which they were enrolled when they

participated in the program. Student schedules being busy, that plan was quickly abandoned in favor of allowing any student who wished to participate, the ability to do so at their preferred time.

Because of the small numbers of students who participated in the 1998 cohort and the fact that a majority of them had graduated, it was not expected that a participant from that cohort year would be available for the focus groups. Students representing FIG years 1999, 2000, 2001 and 2002 participated in the focus groups. In order to represent the 1998 group, I interviewed a staff member who now works with the FIG program, who participated in the 1998 cohort.

A total of five focus groups were conducted during the spring of 2004. Students who responded to the email were directed to a room on campus at an assigned time. The room, a small conference room in the FIG office, was ideally suited for the focus groups. Comfortable chairs were set up around a conference table. A tape recorder with an additional microphone was placed in the center of the table to allow all voices to be heard during the conversation. The room was quiet and away from most noisy distractions so that participants could concentrate on their responses.

In order to maintain the integrity of the data, I recruited doctoral students familiar with qualitative research methods, but unfamiliar with the FIG program to assist with conducting the groups. These individuals were trained by me on the interview protocol and facilitated some of the sessions of student participants.

The students who responded to the emails were from the Colleges of Liberal Arts, Natural Sciences, Communication, Engineering and Business. These are also the five largest colleges by enrollment in the University, and the

colleges that have the largest FIG enrollments. In order to represent the voice of all areas of the University, individual interviews were conducted after the focus groups with students from Social Work, Nursing, Education and Fine Arts. A complete listing of the focus group student participant profiles is included in Table 4.

Table 4: Student Focus Group Participants

Pseudonym	College	Year Participated in FIG
Cade	Natural Sciences	2000
Claudio	Natural Sciences	2001
David	Liberal Arts	2000
Elizabeth	Communication	2002
Erin	Natural Sciences	2001
Hermione	Natural Sciences	2001
Laurie	Liberal Arts	2000
Maria	Communication	2000
Marie	Liberal Arts	1999
Miki	Natural Sciences	2001
Mrs. Langdon	Natural Sciences	2001
Oreo	Natural Sciences	2001
Papa John	Natural Sciences	2001

Zorica	Natural Sciences	2000

At the beginning of each focus group, participants were asked to sign an informed consent form, giving their permission to participate and for the focus group to be audiotaped. Participants were then asked to select a pseudonym for use throughout the focus group. Each student made a nametag with their pseudonym to further facilitate conversation among the participants and to ease identification of each speaker by the group facilitator. Following a focus group format suggested by Glesne (1999) the facilitator guided participants through a series of questions designed to understand further the student perspective of participating in a Freshman Interest Group. A complete script of the focus group appears in Appendix F. The questions began simply, warming students up to the focus group process, and then progressed to more difficult questions. Ultimately, each group was asked to review and comment on the model of the FIG experience as developed by the researcher. Each focus group lasted no more than 1 hour.

Throughout the focus group, I recorded field notes while the participants were speaking. The notetaking process helped me to interpret non-verbal cues given by participants, such as head nodding in agreement, smiles, frowns and confused faces. The notes provided a contextual backdrop for review of the transcription of each tape.

After each focus group, the tapes were labeled and given to Jennifer, my transcriptionist. She transcribed and returned the manuscript to me for review. Upon receipt of each transcription, I transferred my field notes from the focus

groups to the corresponding parts of the conversation so that each group would be analyzed in context. The transcriptions of each focus group were then analyzed and reviewed to determine if the student perspective was congruent with the initial research conducted. A complete description of the interpretation of these findings is discussed in Chapter 5.

Triangulation

Although the purpose of this research was to represent the student perspective of participating in a FIG, it was important to use multiple data sources to confirm the findings. As described in Chapter 3, triangulation is an essential part of maintaining the validity and transferability of qualitative research. While the student focus groups were intended to serve as the major source of triangulation of the data, other groups were also invited to comment on the model that emerged from the initial survey data.

The FIG program worked on a regular basis with a group of 10 academic advisors, representing each college and school. These advisors not only mentored a FIG cluster in their college, but also served as a liaison between the academic college and the FIG office. Most of the individuals in this group were directors of advising or the most senior academic advisor in the area. These individuals were also intimately involved in the day-to-day decision-making process of the FIG program. These advisors influenced cluster course selection for their college's FIGs. Additionally, these advisors consulted with the FIG office on seminar curriculum development, mentor selection and program policies. At a regular meeting of this group, the advisors were invited to review the same model presented to the FIG participants in the focus groups. Because

these advisors were familiar with both the structure of the FIG program, and have each observed the FIG students participating in the program, their input on the model was another critical form of triangulation. The session in which the advisors reviewed the model was conducted similarly to a focus group. After signing the informed consent, advisors were tape recorded discussing the model. Their insight and ideas enhanced further the understanding of the FIG experience.

The last element of the triangulation process was to review the FIG research with individuals from three institutions comparable to The University of Texas at Austin that have FIG programs. Representatives of the University of Washington, the University of Oregon and the University of Missouri-Columbia were asked to review the FIG model. These individuals served as the directors, coordinators or other staff members within the FIG programs at each school. The FIG programs at all three institutions shared common components, including the size of the programs, the complexity across the university's curriculum and the structure and goals of the FIG seminar. This was not intended to be a direct comparison of programs. Rather, the goal of sharing the research with the representatives from the other institutions was to see if there appeared to be any glaring differences between the experiences of students at the different institutions. Because the goal of this research was to represent the voice of a UT-Austin FIG participant, students from the other institutions were not interviewed.

CONCLUSION

The heart of this research was to represent the emic perspective of participating in a FIG at The University of Texas at Austin. A discussion of the qualitative research findings is offered in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

INTRODUCTION

Too frequently in learning community research, we seek elements of student responses that fit nicely within the current or proposed structure of the community under study. One of the greatest challenges for me in this research was to allow the voice of the student participant to be heard while monitoring my own knowledge and personal biases of the program. Throughout the coding process described in Chapter 4, I was diligent in confirmation of the data through member-checking. The results of this study are the perspectives of the students who lived the Freshman Interest Group (FIG) program experience while students at The University of Texas at Austin. The interpretation that follows is confirmed in the reflection of students in the focus groups and the additional triangulation of peer reviewers familiar with the program.

To establish the complex experience of participating in a Freshman Interest Group at The University of Texas at Austin, the results of the coding of the Course-Instructor Surveys as described in Chapter 4 are presented. The major categories are presented with a discussion of and illustrations from the focus groups. The relationships between categories emerges into the model. All quotations are direct transcriptions of participant statements; therefore, are not necessarily grammatically correct. Student participants were permitted to select their own pseudonyms, in order to protect their identity. Some of the pseudonyms are rather humorous and unique but remaining true to the student

voice was an essential part of this research. Only the pseudonyms are used to identify focus group participants below.

OVERVIEW

As explained in Chapter 4, one of the most striking results of the coding of the surveys was that more than 800 cards emerged in the open coding and more than 200 initial category labels (representing original or different thoughts of student participants) emerged in the axial coding. The sheer number of different responses indicates that each student experiences the FIG differently, and that each student finds value in a different part of the FIG experience. For administrators, the implication is an important reminder that each student is an individual, who learns differently, experiences college differently and finds value in different actions, policies and procedures that we may choose to implement. Hermione, a FIG participant in Natural Sciences in 2001 expressed this thought, "Not everyone gets the same thing out of the FIG experience, so everyone can add their own individual things to it." Papa John, another Natural Sciences participant, described a similar experience:

> If I would describe the FIG experience to an incoming freshman, I would say join one and just kind of trust me on it, just because every FIG experience is somewhat alike, but everyone is different, everyone gets something different out of the program, but every experience I have encountered is a good experience.

In learning community research, it is too easy to seek a single nugget of information that points to a best practice. The best practice, as these different student voices represent, may be to remember that each student is an individual.

Perhaps the best representation of the individual nature of the FIG experience is the model developed from this research. Not only are the individual thoughts expressed in the course-instructor surveys represented in the survey, the triangulation process involving advisors, student participants and peer reviewers confirmed that phenomenon.

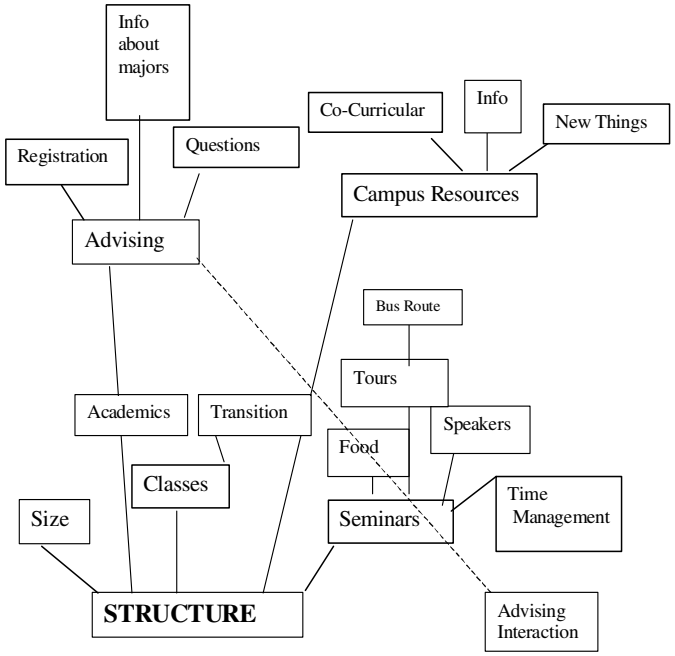
In Chapter 4, I introduced the analogy of a tree to explain the model of the FIG experience (see Appendix D). The heart of the tree is the trunk – it gives the outside world evidence of the strong root system, anchoring the tree. In our model, as shown in Appendix D, Structure and People form the trunk of the tree together. The combination of both a strong structure and a strong system of people within the FIG program serves as the anchor and base for students to establish a strong root system at the university and to allow for the rest of their growth and development, as shaded in dark brown. The continued growth and development of students is represented in the second-level items in the model or the 'branches' of the FIG tree, as shaded in light brown. The branches give the tree definition, shape and structure, just as the model's elements represent the areas in a new student's experience that shape their transition to college. The leaves of the tree provide color, shape, shade and beauty, much like the third, fourth, and fifth level elements of the model are the lasting connections and final stages of growth of an individual in the FIG experience.

Although 53 refined categories emerged from all three phases of coding, the discussion below concentrates on the major categories that emerged out of the base or 'trunk' of the model – Structure and People, as I believe they represent the emic perspective of participation in a FIG cluster. Category headings are labeled according to their placement on the model to reinforce their

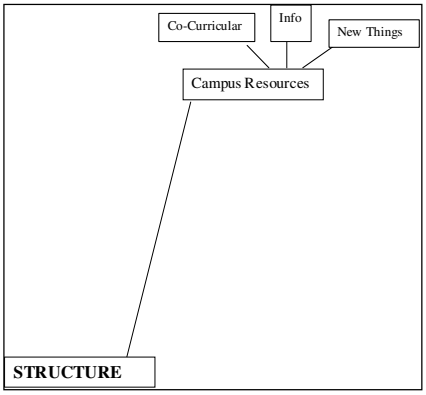
place on the 'tree.' For instance, the category Study Groups, which is a 5th level element of Meeting People in Classes, Community and Peers is represented in the discussion like this: People-Peers-Community-Meeting People in Classes – Study Groups.

The following section dissects the categories Structure and People. For ease of viewing, the section of the model under discussion is isolated. As each subcategory is discussed, pictorials of parts of the model representing the area under discussion are presented in isolation.

STRUCTURE



Structure - Campus Resources



The opportunity to learn about campus resources was an important element of the FIG program to the student participants. Information about campus resources was presented to students in numerous ways including presentations from campus agencies in the FIG seminar; trips around campus to see various centers; individual referrals to campus resources from peer mentors or advisors; and conversations about services available on campus. This category's cards were far more thematically and conceptually based than the others, because

students named a variety of sources for their campus resources, including "UT Learning Center", "Career Exploration Center", and "Libraries". This category helps to illustrate the complex nature of interactions within the FIG program: there was no one experience with campus resources – the experience was largely shaped by the personal interactions that make the referrals.

A total of 66 cards made up the campus resources category. Students in each year made reference to the importance of learning about campus resources, but saturation only occurred in the later years of the program, 2000-2002. Although students from all years did mention campus resources as an important part of their experience, I believe that students in the later years of the program were exposed to more campus resources as a result of greater collaboration with the on-campus agencies that provided those services. Representation in this category was primarily distributed among the larger colleges, Liberal Arts, Communication, Natural Sciences and Engineering, perhaps demonstrating a greater need that those students feel to be connected to resources on campus.

The complex ways in which campus resources factor into the FIG experience were represented in the focus group comments.

Marie:

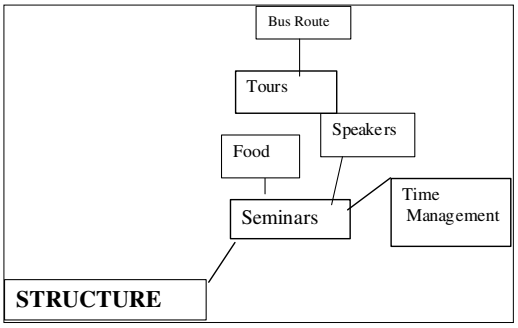
> "I think I'd like to say something about learning campus resources. I remember, there's two things that were salient. One is going to the UGL [Undergraduate Library] and that's where I learned you could check out videos. More, definitely better, I understood the system of how, how it was done. I understood the system of how to look up books … how to, if you want to take a book where to go and look for it. Another campus resource that is still very important to me is, was, going to the student

services [building]. We went through all the floors. One of the floors we visited the volunteer, the UT volunteer center. I had, one of the places that I continue to volunteer in the past four years I learned about through that resource."

David:

"Learning about campus resources, I think to a small degree I learned about it from there… But, I definitely think that it can be a good way to learn about things on campus because there are just so many things people don't know about, even us seniors."

Structure – Seminars



This category included mention of specific seminar topics as well as the seminar in general. Students in Liberal Arts, Business and Engineering dominated this category. For students, the value of the seminar was reinforced by the weekly meetings with the same group of 20 students. For others, specific seminar topics and the opportunity for group discussion in the seminar were valuable.

Cade, Natural Sciences:

"I felt like that was the first time in the FIG seminar that I had experienced anything college related other than the classes. I felt like they introduced me to all the other aspects of college; getting involved on campus, you know, talking with your professors, even you know, fun things to do

around Austin. I felt like that was the attempt to really introduce me to the bigger picture of college and I really appreciated that."

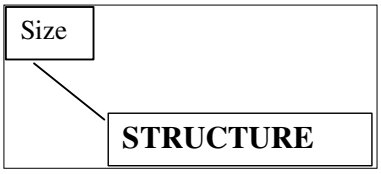
Oreo:

"One of the things I remember from our seminar, I remember we walked around one day in our FIG; we took a Polaroid camera and we had to find different things on campus, it was like a scavenger hunt … but it was fun because we got to see the different buildings on campus and buildings I had never heard of, like it was go find the building with this in it, or go find the building that does something or other. That was one of the most fun things – we got to see all the different buildings, and we got to walk around campus for an hour and it was like 'oh wow, I've never been here before' and it was a good way to get to know the buildings."

Claudio:

"I think I benefited most from it [the seminar] because it was something different every week. It wasn't just that maybe every week I would learn about bus schedules or about where the library is, but it was that I would get something different every week cause it seemed to keep me interested in my other classes because, say I was taking genetics at the time, I would only think about chromosomes and stuff."

Structure - Size



The final major category of structure, size, reflects students' impressions of how the FIG program affected their impressions of the size of the

University. This category included a statement from every academic college represented in the program, including the smaller colleges of Social Work, Fine Arts and Nursing. Responses were scattered among all of the years of the program. Student responses from the focus group confirmed the effect that the FIG program had on their impressions of the size of UT.

Hermione:

> "When I came for orientation, I was telling my parents – they called and were asking what I was doing, what classes I signed up for, I told them I'm joining this program where it like makes UT a lot smaller, kids come into a class with 500 students and get to take classes, two or three classes with twenty other students, makes it a lot smaller and you have this seminar where you learn about the University and study skills, and other things, so basically making it a lot smaller than it actually is."

Laurie:

> "… it really helps you feel like you're at a smaller university in the midst of all of these new freshmen…"

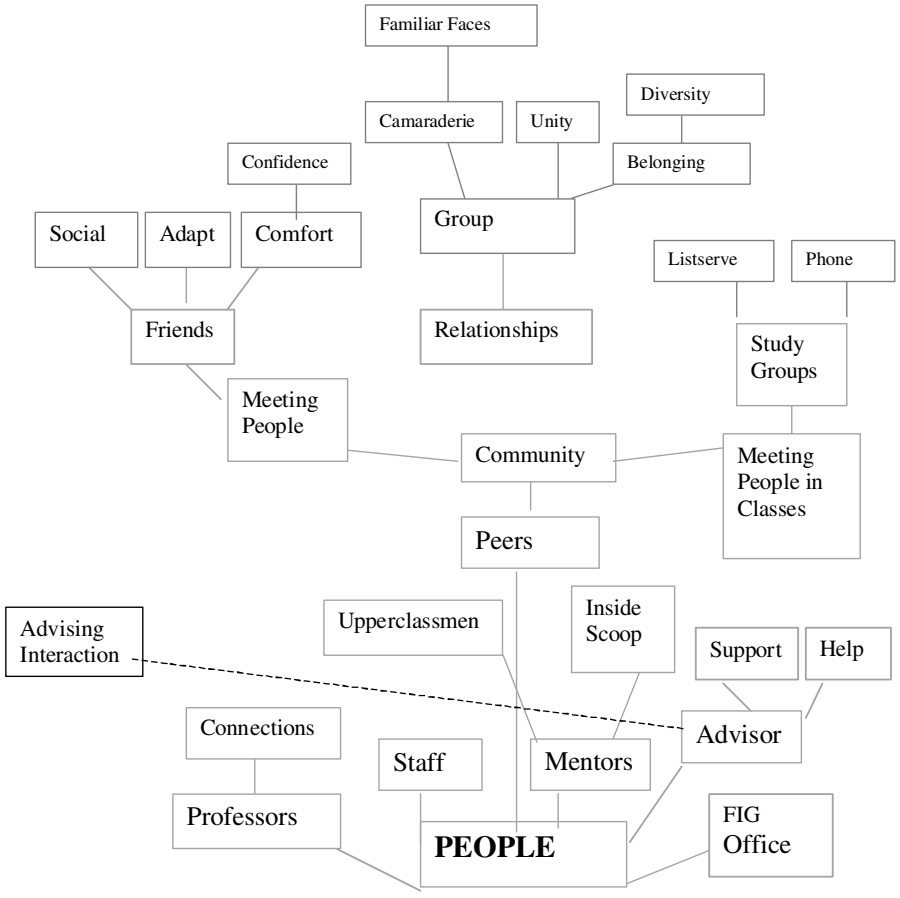
Elizabeth:

> "I would describe FIG as a great opportunity to meet people and become acquainted with the campus and the resources. Most importantly it's a good way to make this huge university feel like it's a smaller place and actually have a community."

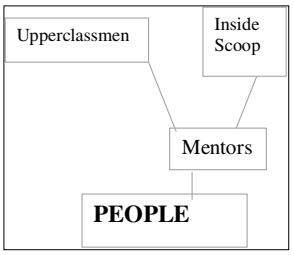
As illustrated above, FIG program participants valued the variety of ways in which the structure of the program affected their experience. In the following

section we examine the ways in which individuals associated with the program brought value and meaning to participant's experience.

PEOPLE



People - Mentor



The peer mentor, or FIG mentor, as the position is commonly known, is an undergraduate student assigned to work with each FIG. This student was usually of the same major as the cluster to which he or she was assigned. Mentors went through a rigorous selection and training process to become part of the FIG program. They, along with the academic advisors, were responsible for planning, implementing and evaluating the weekly seminar topics. The coded survey responses indicated that a personal relationship with a FIG mentor was an important part of the FIG experience. Some students even identified their mentor by name in the survey responses. A total of 22 responses, scattered among all of the FIG years made up the mentor category. The College of Liberal Arts dominated this category with 12 responses (including three mentors personally named), with Natural Sciences and Engineering also supporting this category. It should be noted that the two colleges for whom the advisor was not listed as an important part of the FIG experience, Liberal Arts and Engineering, were strongly represented in this category. Did the peer mentors make up for the shortcomings of advisors in these colleges? Did students in these colleges relate better to peers than to professional advisors? Again, the puzzling results in this category offered interesting possibilities for future research in the program, to be discussed in Chapter 6. However, the focus group participants in all majors had positive things to say about their peer mentors.

Cade, Natural Sciences:

> "I really liked my peer mentor. I really felt like she took the time to try to listen to us and talk to us and give us unbiased advice based on what she had done, but also what we could do that wasn't necessarily following in her footsteps. And I thought she tried really hard to get us involved. She would call us at home when we missed a seminar, just to, not so much to criticize us for missing the seminar, but to make sure everything was okay, and see what was going on. I really, it was really probably one of the reasons that I wanted to become a mentor later on."

Laurie, Liberal Arts:

> "I will talk a little about having a peer mentor. After FIG ended, I continued to go see my peer mentor, pretty regularly. We would meet for coffee, or she would answer any questions I had. She seemed a lot like me in many different ways, and she had also been a government major and done some of the programs that I really wanted to do and so she continuously gave me advice on programs to do, she wrote me letters of recommendation for a few things I applied for, and I've continued to keep contact with her throughout the years, and we're still friends, and we still have a lot of the same interests, and so continuing that relationship can be of benefit to students who don't know who to turn to, maybe at the end of FIG, and it's a really, the peer mentor is really of value."

David, Liberal Arts:

> "Our mentor was pretty good; she was a Plan II student. You know, whenever I would ask her questions, she would research it and get back to us with an answer. She was really laid back. She was friendly."

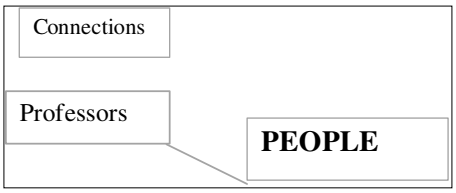
Zorica, Liberal Arts:

> "Having a peer mentor who has been there, that helped a lot because I had lots of questions. I don't even remember half of them now, most of them were like, 'how do I get to Wal-mart taking the bus?' And she would kind of refer me back to the book I had, but there are so like many bus routes it's just really scary to look there, so having somebody guide you through things like that is exciting."

Marie, Liberal Arts:

> "I would like to say that I think that it's very beneficial to have a peer mentor be of the same major of the group because there's things, usually your advisor you have is not from the same university, doesn't have that same major. And often my experience is that no matter what prerequisites are listed for classes, there's just a better sequence about taking, you know, which classes you should take and when and which classes you should not have taken in the same semesters. I think it's often that the advisors are, work off of what they hear about the complaints of the students who come in there in the past and then try to relay that information, but you're gonna get it, your first hand experience from a peer mentor, I think it's extremely invaluable."

People - Professors



Students in the FIG program valued the opportunity to learn more about their professors. Connecting with faculty can be especially challenging at a large institution like

The University of Texas at Austin. Although this category was relatively small (25 cards) the passion with which the focus group participants spoke about their relationships with faculty was powerful.

David:

> "Our Economics professor came [to the FIG] and it was a four hundred-person Economics class. And I remember wondering if professors, you know when I first got in there, if professors just walked around on their own or if they had underground tunnels or something? Like, in a four hundred-person class, the guy's in the front of the room, he seemed, you know he's this Centennial professor of Economics, he seemed so far out there when I was a freshmen. And just him coming and talking to us in the FIG, you know when there were only five of us there really gave me the opportunity to get to know him on a more personal level, you know I was frightened to even to really talk to him. And I didn't really talk to him during that semester. And subsequently he became, he ended up hiring me as a research assistant for a semester. And he was my thesis advisor. I also got to know him pretty well. So I think the FIG helped that. I don't know if I would've approached him, it certainly made me more comfortable with approaching people. I imagine I would've felt that way at some point, but it sped up the process of feeling comfortable talking to different people."

Marie:

> "The second thing I think was a confidence or a comfortability with the professors because as FIG students in our courses, I remember the professors, even if the, you know I guess we made about a third, to two

thirds of the class, but they would point out, raise your hand if you're a part of the FIG and then they knew. I don't think it was warranted, but I felt a certain privilege about going up, you know I'm part of the FIG, I'm interested, and so I just had this attitude of made, immediately made me feel comfortable about going to office hours and talking more about my interests and what I wanted to do or different things I found interesting in class."

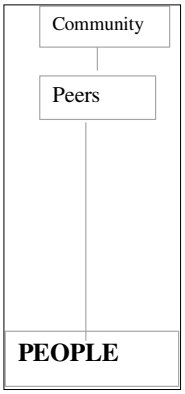
Mrs. Langdon:

"I guess the classes and the professors – we had access to professors that if spots hadn't been saved for freshmen, we wouldn't have gotten those professors, so just being able to have the best professors and then also having twenty other students that were going to be in those classes with you."

Papa John, Natural Sciences

"Like having, in our FIG, we had professors who come in and talk an what not, and actually having them come in and talk to us helped us get to know them better so when we go into office hours, we're not just like hey, my name is so and so. You know, have to introduce yourself there. You're like, hey thanks for coming to my FIG, blah, blah, blah, I have a few questions to ask, get yourself out of there. But you really get to know your professors easier, on a more personal level with the FIG, because of that."

People – Peers - Community

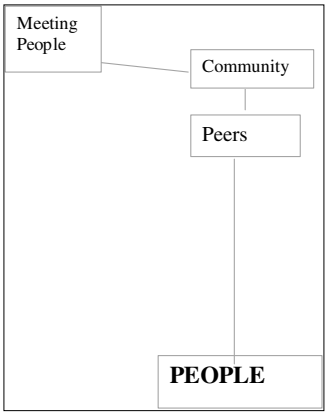


Another category represented in the survey responses was community. This category included simple statements of the word 'community' to complex themes 'I was able to feel part of a community, rather than a large clueless herd.' A total of 16 students discussed the feeling of community as an important part of their FIG experience. Students in all colleges mentioned this feeling, although no particular college dominated the responses. All five years of the program were represented. Similarly, focus group respondents spoke about the feeling of community.

Maria, Communication:

> "I think maybe, I think it's maybe just hinted at, I just, a community, like having a community, but then also having, a community as far as the people you are with immediately in that FIG experience, but then you're also kind of connected with other people in FIGs just cause you know what's going on, you know. And especially, we didn't do this, but I know that some mentors, you know join their FIGs together and do joint activities. So that could be a plus. And then, community as far as connecting more to Austin. You know like I said we went on a field trip to the Austin American Statesman, and you know we got on a bus, so that's something different. And you know went out and we were seeing parts of the city just to get there. And so you know, that was something just learning more about the community that you're in at large as well as just the university community."

People – Peers – Community - Meeting People



The category labeled 'meeting people' quickly emerged as a saturated category within every year of FIG research. Initially coded on the word level only, this category continued to show saturation on a word-for-word match in each of the years analyzed. Of the 804 cards created from the open coding of the surveys, more than 101 cards represented this category. Although the initial word-for-word match created saturation, additional cards were added to the category when analyzed by theme and concept. Saturation was quickly reached within each year in this category, so I continued searching within the category for saturation within each college. Primarily due to the number of participants, the larger colleges (Liberal Arts, Natural Sciences, Engineering, Communication) achieved saturation in this category, although ultimately, all colleges were represented.

The importance of meeting people in the FIG program was not demonstrated only by the quantity of cards or the quality of the redundancy of the topic but rather by the commentary from the student participants.

David, a Liberal Arts participant from 2001 expressed the value of meeting people:

> "I came here from Massachusetts not knowing anyone at UT. So, it was, UT is a large place and the FIG program gave me the opportunity to hopefully get to know people"

Elizabeth, a Communication participant from 2001 also discussed the value of meeting people:

"Definitely the people that I met, would be the best experience from the FIG. It's just because they are still friends now, and they've been in my other classes and we've been able to use our shared FIG experience to make good bonds and be good friends, I guess."

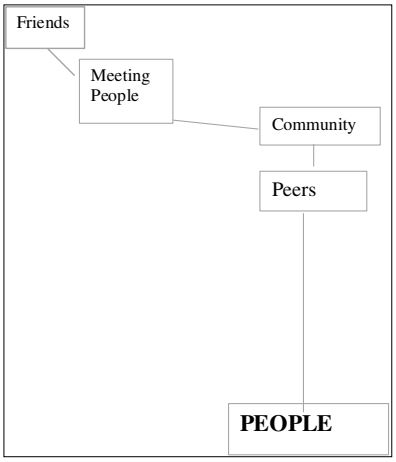
Claudio, a Natural Sciences participant from 2001:

"I feel like meeting people was essential especially because there were two other people from my graduating class coming to UT, and one person ahead of me from my high school coming to UT. So I think that was pretty darn important for me cause I didn't want to join a frat and I don't normally have enough time to dedicate, and I knew I wouldn't have enough time as a freshman to dedicate towards any clubs or organizations because those do require a lot of time. So I think the FIG was important for that because it seemed to me like something I had to go to every week and that other people would have to go where they would have to spend time with me. As sad as that sounds, I think that helped me. Making friends – I've continued a few friendships from my FIG."

Laurie, Liberal Arts participant, 2000:

"The most valuable aspect of it I thought was the familiarity of the faces I saw on a daily basis, knowing that I had people I could go sit with, or study outside of class, made the University feel smaller and I felt more at home."

People – Peers – Community - Meeting People - Friends



Survey respondents and focus group participants made distinctions between meeting people, meeting people in your classes and making friends. Although the three categories were closely tied to one another, not all students found friendships in a FIG. A total of 48 cards formed this category, although saturation did not occur with any particular college or in any particular year. The nature of the friendships and the varying nature of those friendships was best described by the focus group participants.

For Marie, a Liberal Arts participant, the friendships formed were a profound statement on the diversity available at UT.

> "One thing that really meant a lot to me about my FIG was that it, I don't know if it was so much racially diverse because there were three African American women and I think two Hispanic males, and that's probably about everybody else was white, but in somehow in my mind I considered it very racially diverse. I became friends with all three of the African American females. That's something that meant a lot to me because, I think that in the future in my classes, there's almost, there's always an immediate tendency for the blacks to sit next to each other, or you know there was just a little bit of a divide. But I think what was so nice about that was that it forced us to all be together and to hang out and it was small enough, it was a total of nine maybe thirteen, and you know, I'd like

to say I am still friends with two of those girls, and good friends with one of the Hispanic or Puerto Rican, he's half Puerto Rican. So it was really important to me."

Oreo, Natural Sciences:

"I am still friends with them two and a half years later. Or a year and a half later, two years later, something like that and without these meetings and things, I probably wouldn't have ever met most of these people. I was really glad to have made friends with these you know people who were pretty much as me, in the same major, same interests, you know, same things that are gonna go on after college, so it was, I fully enjoyed it, I thought it was great."

Laurie, Liberal Arts:

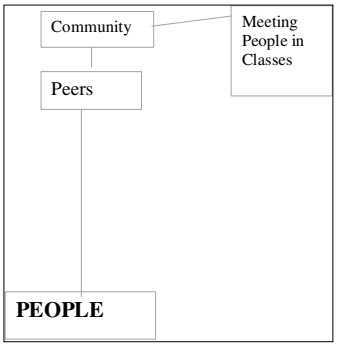
"I think that FIG lasts, like Oreo was saying, lasts beyond your freshmen year. I may not keep in touch with all my FIG friends every week, but every time I see them we still talk and we still hang out. And we always say, hey let's have a FIG reunion. I think that's something a lot of FIGS do is say like; let's all have lunch tomorrow. It gives you friends for your whole college career. And maybe I won't keep in touch with all of them after I graduate, but it's nice to know that you still have those people around and that you see and that you can still talk to or turn to and that's really neat."

Maria, Communications:

"I guess another thing specifically about my experience is that since, we were a communications FIG, and a lot of us had gone different direction within communication, so I don't necessarily see them a lot, but it's just

interesting, it's kind of like, how you think of a high school reunion you wonder where people are going to end up, you know. And so, it's kind of funny when I see people now, I'm like what are you doing now? And some people have changed colleges and some people are you know, instead of going print journalism, they went broadcast, or they went photo, or you know whatever, it's just, that's just kind of interesting. I don't necessarily see a lot of those people you know, everyday or in my classes even, but you know that throughout my experience like you know I'll see people on the street or like I'll go down to the Daily Texan and I'm like, Hey, you used to be in my FIG! You know we'll talk and so you know it kind of, you already have a connection from a few years ago when you did something together. And so, even if those connections aren't immediately affecting you, you know, our society's so much about who you know, that it's important just to, you know just to kind of keep those connections open and recognize that that was a positive experience."

People – Peers – Community - Meeting People in Classes



Although similar to the previous category, 'meeting people', 'meeting people in classes' maintained a distinction in the minds of FIG participants. To those who were in a FIG, the chance to connect with fellow classmates was an important and valuable part of the FIG experience. This category demonstrated similar saturation as the 'meeting people' category, yielding a total

of 61 cards. Participants from all years of the FIG survey contributed to the saturation of this category, as did participants from all academic colleges.

For focus group participants, the value of meeting people in the same classes was an essential part of the FIG experience.

Zorica, a Natural Sciences participant from 2000, highlighted the importance to her academic experience:

> "Sharing classes with the same people and having small classes, it [the FIG] was the smallest class I had because since I was doing a Biology major, I think most of my classes were in the hundreds of people. And so it was really nice that I could express my opinion, and somebody actually remembered that it was *me* (emphasis added) expressing it, not like the person on row ten or something. So, it was, it was really nice."

Hermione:

> "So it makes it a lot easier if you know even one person in the class and then there's that security, that comfort zone you have and then you branch out and still meet other people, but just that security blanket, you know."

Cade, Natural Sciences participant, 2000:

> "And I really found the clustering of classes to be helpful because even the very first day of class I started noticing people that I had seen in my class before. And I was like – are you by any chance in a FIG? And so I met my fellow FIG mates even before my first FIG seminar meeting and it really helped to make me feel like maybe everything would be okay here cause I came from a very small town where I graduated with 84 students, so I walked in and it was a shock. And so to make some friends on the first

day that I know I would be seeing a lot really, really helped me feel like I belonged."

Miki, Natural Sciences participant, 2001:

"I think being in the FIG was very important for me because just to get to know more people in my FIG that I would always see in other classes so that would have someone to study with or talk about major related things."

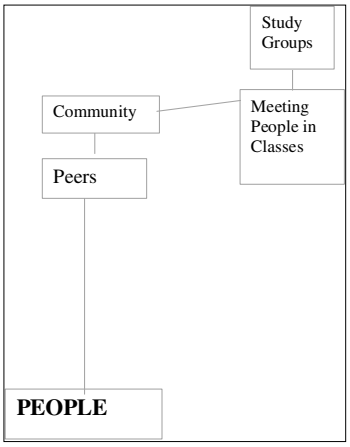
Erin, Natural Sciences participant, 2001:

"The most valuable thing was being in a class with twenty other people you could get a hold of, or being in all of your classes with twenty other people you get could a hold of and know."

Claudio:

"Sharing classes with the same people was, I think, the thing I realized first coming into my FIG. I mean, of course, but I mean I saw that as an immediate benefit of the FIG program as a freshman."

People – Peers – Community - Meeting People in Classes - Study Groups



Elizabeth, a Communication participant from 2002 also valued the meeting people in classes, "I think it was probably really helpful to have classes with the same people because it gave us really good study groups." The survey results demonstrated a similar value placed on study groups – the next largest category. A total of 53 cards made up the 'study groups' category. Like the other categories

before, saturation was achieved in each of the academic years represented in the program.

Mrs. Langdon:

> "Forming study groups, really taking advantage of the hour to get to know them and make relationships outside of class."

Miki:

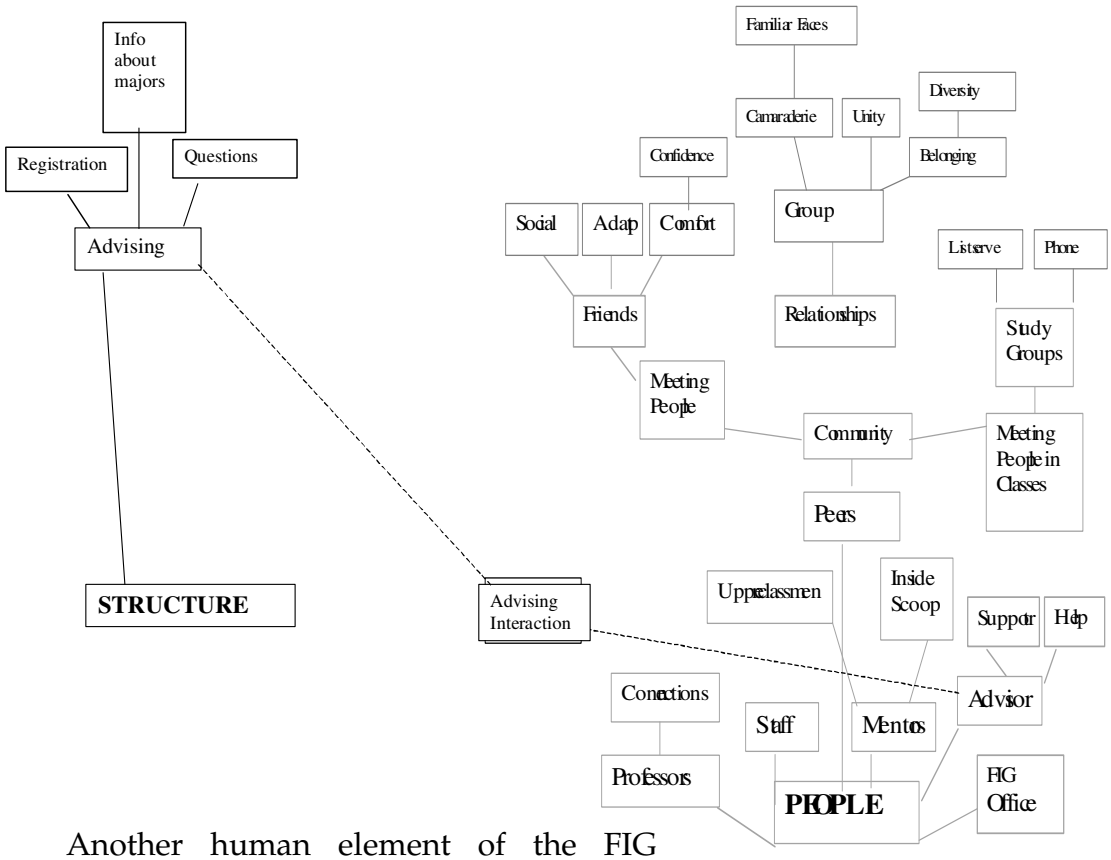
> "Well, I think having a small class experience [the FIG seminar] when we do icebreakers or other activities together you sometimes really find the person that you, maybe you can connect with and you know, if you see each other in the same classes you can study together. And sometimes the FIG mentor sets up study groups for you and you can know each other better on that basis."

A key element of the model of the FIG program was that the major categories do not operate independently of one another. The interaction between the two categories is discussed below.

INTERACTION BETWEEN STRUCTURE AND PEOPLE

Structure – Advising / People – Advisor -→ Advising Interaction

One particular category emerged that belonged in both structure and people. This category, labeled 'advising interaction', resulted out of a combination of responses from students about the nature of both the advising act and the individual offering assistance. It is designated on the model by a dotted line, to indicate the point at which the human and the action intersect.



Another human element of the FIG experience was the interaction with the academic advisors assigned to work with each FIG cluster. The advisor category was represented by 43 cards. Interestingly, this category was overwhelmingly dominated by responses in the Colleges of Natural Sciences (18) and Communication (11). Those two colleges received responses from all years in which the college participated in the FIG program. The College of Business, the College of Education and the College of Fine Arts were also represented. Students in the College of Engineering failed to mention advisors as an important part of their experience, but did appreciate the flexibility of being advised while in the FIG. Advising, the act of being advised

on course registration and degree options, was considered to be a distinct category. Students deliberately separated the individual human advisor from the process of being advised. A total of 18 students most valued advising in their FIG. Again, students in the College of Natural Sciences overwhelmingly dominated the responses in this category, representing seven cards and all five years of the FIG. The value placed on advisors and advising raises many questions for program administrators, to be discussed in Chapter 6. The focus group responses seemed to mirror the survey responses – Natural Sciences students had the most to say about their advisors, while students in Liberal Arts and Engineering either didn't mention or discussed their advisors negatively.

Cade, Natural Sciences:

> "I really found my advisor to be helpful. She was the first person who seemed like she actually cared about me here, not just read a list and said 'oh, you have to do this, or oh, you're not qualified to do this.' She was the first person who I felt took the time to sit down, listen to me, and make advice based on me and not just off of checklists."

Cade continues…

> "I would definitely have to say as far as meeting with your advisor personally, that was something that I found very helpful because it's something that I continued even post-FIG experience. In the College of Natural Sciences after your second year you're not required to ever go in and physically see an advisor and yet I make an appointment every semester just to go in and talk with him because I feel like the face-to-face, one-on-one communication is so much better and I'm not sure that I

would've done that without having had the positive experience from my FIG and knowing that these people are really there to help you."

Miki, Natural Sciences:

"And, meeting the advisor personally, I found that real helpful. And sometimes we can actually discuss maybe registration or other personal problems during the FIG or not in the FIG, but just because in the FIG I have gotten to know the advisor closer than I otherwise would have if I just scheduled an appointment to go in and talk about my registration and that would be it and I wouldn't really know my advisor better."

David, Liberal Arts:

"The advisor? I don't even remember. She would come maybe every other week. It was mostly the peer mentor that I had contact with."

MEMBER CHECKING

Focus group participants, academic advisors, peer reviewers and colleagues from comparison institutions were each asked to review the model and give their feedback. The responses from members from each of these categories were an important part of triangulating the data. First, peer reviewers, including the assistant director of the FIG program, were asked to examine the model and the corresponding cards. The model as described includes some minor changes to the placement of various categories under the FIG "tree." For instance, the final placement of the category "confidence" was a result of conversations with the peer reviewers in which we examined the relationship between comfort and confidence. Although in an earlier version of the model, the two categories appeared side-by-side, it was determined during

the peer review process that comfort was only achieved by students when they felt confidence about their experience at the University.

The final model, with revisions included was also presented to students in the course of their focus group interviews. The diversity and complexity of the FIG experience was mirrored by the student comments on the model.

Mrs. Langdon, Natural Sciences;

> "I like how they broke it up into people and structure and through people you go down and see 'okay I am meeting peers and in our community I meet new people', and I like how it goes through steps and then I feel more comfortable and then I build my confidence, and how it just kind of goes through the different aspects of that and then you have the structure and it kind of tells you about the advising. It's a different way to approach it, but it kind of gives you a new perspective on the program."

Cade, Natural Sciences:

> "I like the web-like structure. It seems like it very does represent FIG because its not linear, its not one thing leads to another, but it, you know, the only thing I might suggest is that it's all interconnected and there's a relationship between people and structure and peers and structure and things like that. But it definitely seems to highlight some of the values that I found are important."

Cade continued…

> "I felt like I really didn't appreciate all that it meant to me until later on. I felt like, you know, like I said it was great to have that support structure, but as far as all the information that was, you know was just dumped on me, which is probably just indicative of the first year of college in general.

> Now that I am kind of, I feel like, I 'm where I came in, I'm where I wanted to be, so now looking back on it I look at all the things that were very pivotal and very important, and I really can point to that FIG experience. And it's not one specific thing I could point to, but looking back on it, it was very valuable."

Marie, Natural Sciences

> "I was going to say, I think the model was good for the group I was in because that's actually where most of our friendship connections, I think began. "

Claudio, Natural Sciences

> "I think it pretty much sums everything up. I think that's why I was looking at it so long is because I was trying to think of anything it was missing, and I can't. I'm sure that if I looked at it long enough there'd be plenty that I saw missing, but I think it describes the most important things… the chaos of the FIG being the most important part in my opinion."

Claudio described the chaos of the FIG as a valuable part of his experience earlier in the session.

> "You get set on these tracks in your academic classes that seem to be so linear, and then you have a FIG and it seems, it seems chaotic as a freshman, but I've learned that it's a lot more structured than that, but yet I think the chaos benefits as a freshman just because it does add a little bit of interest. Again, that's why they're Freshman Interest Groups."

Maria, Communication

"Yeah… it definitely seems to be pretty comprehensive on what FIG does and what people gain from it."

A group of academic advisors representing each of the academic colleges in which FIGs participate were also asked to review the model. They had similar reactions as the student participants to the model.

Natural Sciences Advisor:

"I don't know if it's by design, but the center, the heart is the relationships, group, meeting people, community. My sense is that it's a real strong component and really helps create the higher levels of retention and academic satisfaction. I know a lot of students feel a sense of community within this large university; it's very helpful. And just to have friends and know other people and get together and that type of thing."

Nursing Advisor:

"You know, I think it's the connection that they make with their peers that's so important. And it really helps retain the freshmen and make them feel a part of the UT campus. So that's the main heart of it right there, I see."

"I find it interesting that someone actually feels like confidence came as a part of [FIG] I never really thought about that."

Fine Arts Advisor:

"It makes sense to me that it [confidence] does come out of it because it reminds me of group therapy. If you've ever been in group therapy, and the trauma and the pain of being in group therapy, but what emerges out of it is the reflection of the self through the eyes of the others. And so I

think the confidence comes out of that process of seeing themselves in the eyes of their peer group, and the reflection back whether it be negative or positive has an effect, I think, of instilling a confidence."

Education Advisor:

"Just the exposure to different cultures within the FIG, you know because ours just by chance happened to be pretty diverse. And we had a student from [a small town in Texas] that was in our FIG with three Hispanics and three blacks and she loved it. And at the end of the FIG she was like 'you know, I could have never done anything like this back in my hometown, and you know I came here'. I was thinking – okay, how is she going to handle this? But she ended up, you know, kind of flourishing in it and did really well, so I don't know where you would fit that in, diversity maybe?, but I think that's a big, big experience just being able to expose some students to some experiences that they haven't had."

The final group to examine the model was representatives from FIG programs at comparison institutions. These individuals, in their roles as directors and staff members at the universities of Washington, Oregon and Missouri had completed research about the FIG programs at their respective institutions. The goal in using these institutional representatives in the triangulation process was to determine if the UT student experience was dramatically different than that of other students.

Although the other research was primarily quantitative in nature, data from students in those learning communities generally agreed with the conclusions of this research as demonstrated by the model.

The value of the social connection found within FIGs was common among students from the various institutions. Similar to the UT-Austin FIGs, students at the University of Missouri most liked the opportunity to "make friends" (A. Beckett, personal communication, May 5, 2004). The social transition assistance provided by the FIG program was one of the top themes that emerged in evaluations from the University of Oregon (B. Pfeiffer, personal communication, May 17, 2004). Each of these programs had a similar academic format, including cluster courses and a corresponding seminar. The academic focus of the FIG does not diminish the value of the social interactions that students experience in small groups.

Additionally, the other FIG programs experienced a similar emphasis on the importance of the peer-to-peer connection, as well as the value of the student mentor. Other similar positive themes included the small group environment and the availability of access to campus and community resources through the FIG group. The opportunity to share classes with friends and fellow students was appreciated by students at each institution.

One distinct difference that was noted by colleagues at other institutions was the role of the advisor. Since academic advisors were not as integral a part of the FIG program at the comparison institutions, students generally did not place a lot of emphasis on advisor connections. Instead, those students discussed the role of faculty and peer mentors, but not professional academic advisors. The unique role of advisors in the FIG program at UT-Austin and the similar value that UT-Austin students place on advisors, faculty and fellow peers should not be discounted.

The model of the UT-Austin FIG program was generally viewed by these individuals to be a valuable tool in explaining the FIG experience, especially given the dearth of qualitative research about this type of learning community.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study, like all research, has some limitations. When seeking the emic perspective of student participants, it would be ideal to include the voices of all participants. This study's limitations resulted from the number of participants, graduation, attrition and student participation. The large number of total participants in the FIG program over the last five years (5000+) was the first limitation encountered in the research. It would have been impractical to facilitate focus groups involving all of the past participants in the program. Additionally, only students who were still on campus were invited to participate in the focus groups. Those who had graduated were not contacted to participate, given the expectation that they would not be readily available for on-campus focus groups. Attrition from the University was also a limitation. Students who did not continue at the University, either for personal or academic reasons, also were not contacted to participate in the focus groups. As is the challenge with many other forms of learning community or retention research, the University did not maintain records of students who had departed the institution, making contact with those students difficult. Although the survey data likely captured some of those students' perspectives before they left the institution, the lack of participation of those individuals in the focus group process is worth noting.

Because this study sought to capture the emic perspective of the FIG experience, those voices and experiences were not examined using any

demographic data. Student participant gender and ethnicities were not tied to their responses. It is impossible to discern if any significant differences existed between male and female participants. Because the gender representation in FIGs closely mirrored that of the University in general, gender-related findings might have been useful for the institution in understanding differences overall. Similarly, the ethnic breakdown of participants in the FIG program closely mirrors that of the University as a whole. This study's ability to assist administrators in understanding the perspective of an ethnic group within the program was limited. As more attention is paid to the specific needs of underrepresented ethnic groups on college campuses, it would be valuable to know if any differences exist within the FIG program.

Finally, the nature of qualitative research involves making connections and assumptions about the data collected. Although strong methods of triangulation, including member checking by students, advisors, peer reviewers and comparison institution colleagues were employed, the fact remains that the researcher was intimately involved in both the program administration and this research.

CONCLUSION

This chapter highlights the major categories in the FIG experience model. Although Structure and People formed the two major category heads and several major topics were discussed here, all categories that emerged from the research were included in the model. A hallmark of qualitative research is the focus on representing all voices involved. The inclusion of descriptive statistics of the

categories was designed to help the reader understand the nature of the coding and saturation process. But, as Berg (2001) warns,

> Researchers must bear in mind, however, that these descriptive statistics – namely, proportions and frequency distributions – do not necessarily reflect the nature of the data or the variable. If the theme "positive attitude toward shoplifting," appears 50 times in one subject's interview transcript and 25 times in another subject's, this would not be justification for the researchers to claim that the first subject is twice as likely to shoplift as the second subject. In short, researchers must be cautious not to take or claim magnitudes as findings in themselves. The magnitude for certain observations is presented more fully in the overall analysis (p.243).

The model allows the reader to understand the connection between the categories, regardless of the size of categories.

Although there are two distinct main branches of the FIG Tree, Structure and People, it is important to recognize that both branches make the tree complete – neither side is more or less important than the other side. One cannot inherently separate the people from the program structure or vice versa. The complexity of the model is also the beauty of the model – there is no one experience that represents the entire emic perspective of participating in a FIG at The University of Texas at Austin. The implications of this complex experience will be further examined in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

One of the strengths of qualitative research is that it can provide valuable insight into the thoughts, feelings and experiences of a group. This qualitative research demonstrated, first and foremost, that there is no one essential FIG experience. For the FIG program research to be most effective, we must combine what we know about the FIG program with what students describe as their experience with the program. Students had similar experiences and valued comparable aspects of the program; however, there was no one agreed upon experience.

This chapter reviews the implications of the findings and provides recommendations for future research into the student experience of participating in a learning community.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

In this section, the study's findings and their relation to administration and practice in higher education are discussed. The FIG model, or FIG 'tree' will serve as the foundation for understanding the implications for practice. The importance of the tree metaphor should not be underestimated when considering the FIG program's implications on a college campus. Just as no two trees are alike, as demonstrated in Chapter 5, the student experience in the FIG program was a complex one in which students revealed value in both the structure and the people involved in the program. Practitioners and

administrators should pay careful attention to the fact that no one experience was valued by FIG participants more than others. Frequently, administrators seek a panacea or solution to the challenge of creating a more positive first-year student experience. This research solidifies that each student is an individual who experiences college differently. Administrators must seek programs that allow students to make the most of their college experience, rather than trying to create the perfect experience for all students.

The following sections review the implications from the two foundation areas of the model: structure and people.

Structure

Three major implications emerged from the structure: advising, size and seminars. As described in Chapter 2, learning community research describes several different models, including cluster courses, team-taught programs and students in larger classes, all of which contribute to student success and retention. Student voices from this research had positive things to say about most elements of the structure of the FIG program, including the cluster of courses, the seminar topics, and the registration process.

In practice, the importance of the advising process, including information about majors and registration should not be underestimated. Academic advising is available to students in all majors at The University of Texas at Austin. The distinguishing factor between advising in general and advising through the FIG program is that in-FIG advising was conducted in a group process. As the model demonstrates, students felt free to ask questions and seek out information about majors. Just as a cluster of trees provides more shade and more places to rest,

perhaps the comfort of a group and the ease of access to the advising process facilitated by the FIG program would benefit other students.

With more than 50,000 students, The University of Texas at Austin recognizes and struggles to manage its size. With a large undergraduate population comes a variety of challenges including large lower-division class sizes, larger than preferred faculty-to-student ratios, and a general impression by the public and students that they are "just a number." The effect of the FIG program on the impression of size was another value worth exploring in other settings. FIG students were still exposed to large class sizes, with some courses reaching 500 students. But, students still remarked that the FIG program "made the school seem smaller," and "made the campus smaller than it really is." Another student remarked about "the shrinking effect it [the FIG] had on campus." By offering students an opportunity to be in a smaller group, 20 students, like the size of each FIG, administrators could translate this shrinking effect to other populations.

The benefit of small seminars has been well-documented in higher education research (Tinto, 1993). Small seminars are used in honors programs, graduate school and for upper-level research and discovery courses on many college campuses. Rarely, are first-year students exposed to a small-group seminar. The FIG students valued their seminar experience because it provided an opportunity for them to experience activities not normally offered in larger, lecture-style classes. Not only did students have an opportunity to learn about campus resources, their experience included tours, special speakers and even food. Administrators should consider developing more small seminars for first-year students. The importance of exposure to activities as simple as tours of

facilities, or even rewarding students with food, made the FIG students value their first-year experience.

What is yet to be understood is whether the combination of the elements of reduced size, seminars, classes, campus resources and advising is more valuable than offering students access to the same structure individually.

People

The strength and complexity of the "people" side of the FIG model has five serious implications for practice: staff, peers, advising, community and emotions. As demonstrated by the model, students in the FIG program valued all individuals with whom they interacted. Professors, Peers, Mentors, Advisors, Staff and the FIG Office were each valued by the students, with no one area more important than the others. Administrators must recognize that student growth, development and success are not tied solely to their academic experience. Although faculty are an important and valuable part of the FIG experience, students did not place any less value on advisors, mentors or staff. On many college campuses, staff, particularly those in student affairs, struggle to be recognized for their contributions to student development. For the student participants in the FIG, all individuals were valuable parts of their growth and development. Administrators must create systems that encourage and reward all individuals who have student contact.

In the FIG model, the peer section had numerous branches and leaves describing the complex interaction of students within the program. Colleges and universities cannot ignore the power of peer-to-peer contact. As collaborative learning and learning community theories have discussed (Gabelnick,

MacGregor, Matthews & Smith, 1990), students learn best in situations where other peers are present. The value of peers in the FIG experience cannot be underestimated. Not only were peers a critical part of the social transition to college (meeting people and making friends); they were equally valuable in the academic transition as well (meeting people in classes and study groups). Colleges and universities should seek out and reward programming that encourages students to interact and learn from one another. The benefit and value to students was made clear by the FIG participants.

As was discussed above in the Structure section, the categories 'advising' and 'advisor' offered some puzzling results. The intersection of the act of advising and the individual doing the advising offered some puzzling questions. Advisors in the College of Natural Sciences were frequently and individually named as a valuable resource, while students in the College of Engineering failed to mention advisors at all. What is the implication for those who administer advising services on campus? Does this imply, for instance, that the advisors in the College of Natural Sciences were inherently more caring? Did students in Natural Sciences need more advising than students in other colleges? The College of Natural Sciences included advising a FIG cluster in the job description of every advisor in the college – was the college's commitment to the program reflected in the student responses?

As a function of improving the first-year experience on campus, many colleges are committed to improving the sense of community on campus. Significant resources are spent creating programs in an attempt to improve community, including new student convocations and other campus-wide programming. In this research, the element of community was a function of peer

interaction. Administrators and program planners should ensure that the events they sponsor include peer-to-peer interaction. Perhaps community, as defined by the student, is not congruent with the institution's definition of community. Efforts should be made to ensure congruency between the definitions and the activities that attempt to build community.

Lastly, administrators should pay close attention to the myriad of emotions expressed by students participating in this program. Feelings of belonging, comfort, confidence, camaraderie and unity are powerful reflections of a new student's experience and should not be discounted. Wise administrators would seek out ways to foster these emotions in all new students through effective programming, staffing and resource allocation.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The value of qualitative research is that it opens a variety of areas for discovery beyond the initial study as information and understanding emerge from the saturation of the data. Qualitative research goes beyond numerical inference to explore why phenomena occur and the relationships between phenomena. Additional saturation to make this research more rich would include additional participants, demographic data and an examination of other prompts in the survey research.

For future research involving the FIG program at The University of Texas at Austin, it would be ideal to include participants not currently on campus. As noted in the discussion of limitations in Chapter 5, both graduated students and those not currently enrolled at the University, were not included in this research.

Including those students would contribute to the overall understanding of the FIG student experience.

The survey data revealed some interesting trends within each college. Future research should seek greater explanations for the differences in perspectives between participants of the various colleges. It is impossible to determine the nature of those differences with this research – uncovering the nature of those differences would further enhance our understanding of how students in different majors understand their FIG experiences. It would also help identify subtle changes in the curriculum between and among the various colleges.

This research covered the first five years of the FIG program. Although some trends within years were noted, the trends were not examined in close relation to the program changes enacted each year. It would be useful in future research to compare any changes in student responses to changes in the program administration.

Although the median SAT score of FIG participants had not changed dramatically over the five years of the program, overall, the SAT score at the University rose over the five years represented in the research. As admission to the University became more competitive and students became better prepared academically, it would be worth researching any possible impact on the FIG experience.

The responses in this study yielded two major categories into which the student participants placed the value of the program. Additional research is needed to understand the scope of the "structure" and the "people" within the FIG experience. Specifically, in the "structure" section, it would be valuable to

understand if students placed more value on the FIG seminar or the cluster of courses. Does the combination of courses included in the cluster influence the value that students place on that part of the program structure? Does the curriculum of the seminar, which varies slightly among FIGs, influence the value placed on it by students?

The "people" category is also worth exploring in future research. In most cases, the title, not the name of an individual associated with the program, was identified by students in this research. Is it the individual and his or her personal characteristics that impacted the student experience, or is it the nature and power of the position that the individual holds that students find valuable? Are certain professors, advisors or mentors better at their jobs, and subsequently affect the student experience in FIGs more than others? The human characteristics are worth exploring in more detail.

Finally, this research focused on the elements that students found valuable in their FIG experience. Future research examining the elements that students found not valuable would add to the body of literature about the first-year experience. Comparing and contrasting the elements deemed most valuable and those deemed not valuable, the program could be refined to emphasize the elements that most impact the FIG experience.

The size and scope of the Freshman Interest Group Program at The University of Texas at Austin's offers a wealth of information about the first-year experience. Future research on the program, combined with the results of this research and research from comparison institutions could be valuable in the search for greater answers to understanding the experience of new students on college campuses.

SUMMARY

This qualitative study revealed the emic perspective of participating in a Freshman Interest Group at The University of Texas at Austin. That perspective is an individual one, given its roots through the structure and people that provide the foundation for the program. The branches provide students a place to grasp onto as they grow and develop, allowing them to find campus resources; providing friends; offering study groups and the opportunity to interact with a variety of individuals on campus. The size of the program, reflected in the many branches and leaves of the tree, helps students feel more comfortable, feel more like they belong and feel a sense of community.

Under this FIG tree, the core purpose of The University of Texas at Austin is achieved: to transform lives.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: SAMPLE FIG SEMINAR OUTLINES

Freshman Interest Group Program
Science and Society
Monday 2-3pm
LLB 103
Fall 2001

Instructor: Diane Larson
Office: PAI 1.13
Phone: 471-3796
e-mail: delarson@mail.utexas.edu
Office Hours: by appointment, but I'm here M-F 8-5pm usually

Peer Mentor: Gina Chavez
Phone: 495-4024
e-mail: ginamc@mail.utexas.edu
Home: LLD 121; Office hours by appointment

Seminar Objectives
This seminar will give you an opportunity to explore issues relevant to new students in a university environment, while learning more about issues relevant to students in your discipline. When you complete this seminar you should have a better understanding of the University and issues important to the UT community. You will become familiar with models of learning while focusing on your own academic goals. Most importantly, you will have experience working collaboratively with other students and develop important skills to ensure your academic success.

Course Goals
You should be able to demonstrate the following abilities during and upon completion of this seminar
Examine your strengths and abilities to be successful in an academic environment leading to educational and professional success;
Learn and develop skills necessary to succeed in a college environment including note-taking and test-taking skills, stress management, and wellness;
Understand college and university rules, resources, and services;
Use campus technology effectively;
Enhance your observation, critical thinking, group discussion, reading, writing, speaking, and visual presentation skills.

Course Policy
No academic credit will be given for the course, but attendance is expected.

Religious Holiday Observance Policy (General Information Catalog, pg 75, or at www.utexas.edu/student/registrar/catalogs/gi00-01/)
A student who is absent from a class or examination for the observance of a religious holy day may complete the work missed within a reasonable time after the absence, if proper notice has been given. Notice must be given at least fourteen days prior to the classes scheduled on dates the student will be absent. For religious holy days that fall within the first two weeks of the semester, notice should be given on the first day of the semester. It must be personally delivered to the instructor and signed and dated by the instructor, or sent certified mail, return receipt requested. A student who fails to complete missed work within the time allowed will be subject to the normal academic penalties.

Student with Disabilities
Please notify me of any modification/adaptation you may require to accommodate a disability-related need. You will be requested to provide documentation to the Dean of Students' Office in order that the most appropriate accommodations can be determined. Specialized services are available on campus through Services for Students with Disabilities (SSB 4.104, 471-6529, www.utexas.edu/depts/dos/ssd/).

Policy on Scholastic Dishonesty
Students who violate University rules on scholastic dishonesty are subject to disciplinary penalties, including the possibility of failure in the course and/or dismissal from the University. Since such dishonesty harms the individual, all students, and the integrity on the University, policies on scholastic dishonesty will be strictly enforced. For further information, please visit the Student Judicial Services web site at http://www.utexas.edu/depts/dos/sjs/.

We're here to help you have the best first year that you can. Ask questions! There are no dumb questions. The worst thing you can do is to have your questions go unanswered. We're glad you are a part of the program and we look forward to working with you this year!

The University of Texas at Austin
Freshman Interest Group
2001

September 10	Introduction to Seminar Icebreakers	LLB 103
September 17	Scavenger Hunt	LLB 103
September 24	Getting around Austin / Pictures	LLB 103
October 1	Sociology Professor Visit	LLB 103
October 8	Getting involved on campus Take career test	LLB 103
October 15	Career Exploration Interpret test results	LLB 103
October 22	Advising	LLB 103
October 29	Advising	LLB 103
November 5	Bowling	Meet at Union
November 12	Speed Reading	LLB 103
November 19	Trip to Players - Shakes	Meet at Players
November 26	Final Exam Preparation	LLB 103
December 3	Last Class Day - Party & Evaluations!	LLB 103

APPENDIX B: SAMPLE FIG EVALUATION SURVEY

FIG Evaluation

The college or school in which I am enrolled is:
A. Architecture B.. Business Administration
C. Communication D.Education E. Engineering F.Fine Arts
G.Liberal Arts H. Natural Sciences I.Nursing J.Social Work

Your residence this semester:
A. On campus residence hall B. Off campus residence hall
C. With parents or other relatives D. Apartment, room or other private home E.Other

Gender:
A. Female B. Male

Items all use the same response scale in which:
A = Definitely yes
B = Yes
C = Uncertain or neutral
D = No
E = Definitely no

(1) The weekly FIG meetings were valuable.

(2) The FIG helped me to develop study skills for UT coursework.

(3) The weekly meetings helped me gain knowledge about my college and major.

(4) Being in a FIG helped me feel more comfortable at UT.

(5) I learned about campus resources this semester.

(6) I learned about ways to become involved on campus.

(7) I know where to find help when I need it.

(8) I feel as though I am a part of the University of Texas community.

(9) I know how to find information about academic departments and classes.

(10) I feel comfortable approaching and talking with UT academic advisors.

(11) I feel comfortable approaching and talking with UT faculty.

(12) I found the group discussions in my FIG helpful.

(13) My peer mentor was easy to approach when I needed help or had concerns.

(14) My peer mentor was organized and well prepared.

(15) My peer mentor presented information effectively.

(16) My peer mentor is someone I would recommend to lead a FIG again.

(17) My professional advisor was sensitive to the needs of the students.

(18) My professional advisor showed a genuine interest in the FIG.

(19) My professional advisor presented information effectively.

(20) My professional advisor is someone I would recommend to lead a FIG again.

(21) I think that the FIGs should last for two semesters instead of one.

(22) I would recommend FIGs to a new UT freshman.

FOR ITEMS BELOW, CHOOSE THE APPROPRIATE RESPONSE FROM THOSE GIVEN FOR EACH ITEM.

(23) The time of day of my FIG seminar was:
A = too early B = just right C = too late

(24) Did you meet with your academic course instructors:
A=frequently B=occasionally C=never

25. Did you meet with a Teaching Assistant (TA)?
A=frequently B=occasionally C=never

26. I was absent from my academic classes:
A = Never B = Once or twice C = 3 or 4 times
D = 5 to 9 times E = 10 or more times

27. I was absent from the FIG seminar:
A = Never B = Once or twice C = 3 or 4 times
D = 5 to 9 times E = 10 or more times

28. How many hours outside of class did you spend studying each week (total for all classes)?
A = 40 or more hours B = 39-30 hours C = 29-20 hours D = 19-10 hours
E = less than 10 hours

29. Compared with what I expected to get out of a FIG, I feel I got:
A= Far more than I expected B = More than I expected C= What I expected D = Less than I expected E = Far less than I expected

Comments
Please answer the following questions. Your input is very important and will be used to help improve the FIG program. The FIG program and your FIG instructor will receive this form after the semester is over.

The most valuable aspect of being in a FIG was:

The least valuable aspect of being in a FIG was:

What advice would you give us for changing the FIG program next year?

Would you make any changes in the courses that were included in your FIG?

The most helpful thing my advisor did for my FIG was:

The most helpful thing my peer mentor did for my FIG was:

APPENDIX C: SURVEY DATA AFTER SELECTIVE CODING

Card Information and Category Labels

Total Cards Created : 804

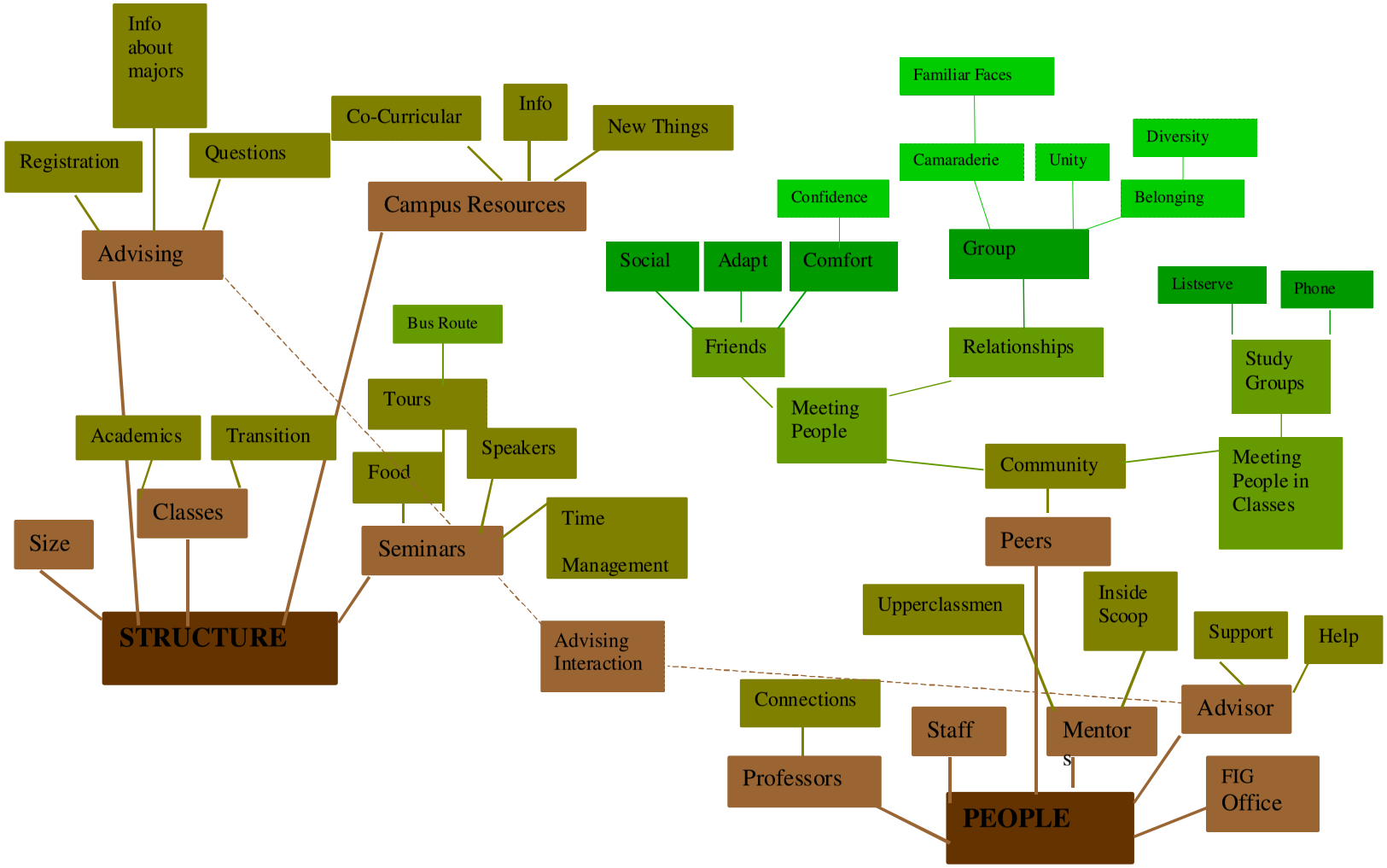
1998 – 122
1999 – 111
2000 – 255
2001 – 102
2002 – 214

Category Title

- Study groups
- Co-curricular
- Housing
- Friends
- Classes
- Comfort
- Professors
- Food
- Time Management
- FIG Office
- Traditions
- Meeting People
- Relationships
- Speakers
- Connections
- UT (campus) Resources
- Academics
- Social
- Inside Scoop
- Unity
- Group
- Meeting People In Classes
- Advisor
- Peers
- Size
- Info
- Tours
- Belonging
- Information about majors
- Adapt
- Camaraderie
- Registration
- Upperclassmen
- Support
- Community
- Advising
- New Things
- Questions
- Mentor
- Transition
- Seminar
- Confidence
- Phone
- Roommate
- Help
- Mentor & Advisor
- Bus Route
- Staff
- Familiar Faces
- Diversity

APPENDIX D: FIG MODEL

Freshman Interest Group Program – FIG Model



APPENDIX E: FOCUS GROUP EMAIL

E-mail recruitment script

Hello,

My name is Cassandre Alvarado and I am a graduate student in Educational Administration. You are receiving this email because our records indicate that you participated in the Freshman Interest Group (FIG) program in the fall semester of 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001 or 2002. You are invited to participate in a research study designed to learn more about the student experience in the Freshman Interest Group program. This study is voluntary, but your participation can help us learn more about the student experience of participating in a learning community. We hope to learn more about what elements of the FIG program you find most valuable. This research is part of my dissertation and is under the supervision of Marilyn Kameen, Ph.D., a Professor in Educational Administration.

The research study involves participating in a 1.5 hour focus group with 4-8 other former FIG students on (*insert date here*). All focus groups will take place on campus.

If you are interested in participating in the focus group, please reply to this email with your name, major, email address and year of FIG participation. Additional details about the study will be sent to you in a confirmation email.

Sincerely,

Cassandre Alvarado
Doctoral Student
Educational Administration

APPENDIX F: FOCUS GROUP SCRIPT

I. Introduction

• *Consent forms and selection of pseudonym.*
The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects requires that you sign a form consenting to participate in this focus group. Please read over the information on this form carefully and sign at the bottom. I can provide you with a copy if you so desire.

The IRB also requires that we protect your anonymity. Accordingly, we cannot use your real name at any time during this focus group. Please take a minute to select a false name for use in this focus group and write it on your name tag. This is the name by which I will call you and the name you should use when speaking.

Basically, I'm going to ask you as a group to respond to a series of questions about the FIG program. Obviously, you are here because you participated in a FIG while as a freshman here at UT. Please think back to your FIG experience only, and don't use comments from other students.

A few ground rules. Because this is being recorded, please do not speak while others are speaking. I will ask a question and if you would like to respond, please raise your hand. I will acknowledge you in turn to speak. Before you begin speaking, please tell us your pseudonym.

Before we get started, let's go around in a circle and each say our pseudonym and the year in which you were enrolled in a FIG.

II. Questions

1. Why did you enroll in a Freshman Interest Group (FIG) cluster?

2. What is your reactions to, experiences with the:
    a. FIG enrollment/registration process?
    b. The combination of courses in the FIG?
    c. The FIG seminar topics?
    d. FIG Peer mentor?
    e. FIG Advisor?

3. What was the most valuable part of being in the FIG program?

4. How would you describe your FIG experience to:
    a. Your parents
    b. Your friends
    c. Prospective UT students
    d. Your advisor
    e. A faculty member
    f. Someone not associated with UT

5. In previously conducted FIG research, students have mentioned the following categories as being an important part of their FIG experience. Please share with us your thoughts and reactions to this list:
    a. Meeting people
    b. Making friends
    c. Sharing classes with the same people
    d. Having a small class experience
    e. Food
    f. Meeting your advisor personally
    g. Having a peer mentor who has "been there"
    h. Getting good classes
    i. Getting good professors
    j. Learning about campus resources

6. Using information from other surveys completed about the FIG program, we've created this model to highlight valuable elements. Does this accurately represent your thoughts on FIG? What do you think of this model?

7. Are there any other elements of your FIG experience that you would like to share?

APPENDIX G: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Informed Consent to Participate in Research

The University of Texas at Austin

You are being asked to participate in a research study. This form provides you with information about the study. The Principal Investigator (the person in charge of this research) or his/her representative will also describe this study to you and answer all of your questions. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything you don't understand before deciding whether or not to take part. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Title of Research Study:
Emic Perspectives: The Freshman Interest Group (FIG) Program at The University of Texas at Austin

Principal Investigator(s) (include faculty sponsor), UT affiliation, and Telephone Number(s):
Cassandre Alvarado, Doctoral Student 232-3997
Marilyn C. Kameen, Ph.D., Professor, 471-7255

Funding source: none

What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of this study is to understand, from a student perspective, the experience of participating in a Freshman Interest Group (FIG) Program cohort. While it is known that learning communities, like FIG programs, contribute to student retention, little is known about how and why these programs work. Significant quantitative data exist to document improvements in retention, but there remains a dearth of research from the student perspective on learning communities, especially programs in large, public, research institutions. This study seeks to understand the student experience in FIGs and to understand what elements of the program do participants find to be most valuable. This study is being conducted as partial fulfillment of requirements for a doctoral degree in Educational Administration at The University of Texas at Austin.

What will be done if you take part in this research study?

Participation in this study will involve a 1.5 to 2.0 hour audiotaped focus group. You will be given the opportunity to select a pseudonym prior to participation in the study. This name will be used on all transcripts and any future use of this information. Your participation and all information obtained from you as a participant will be confidential. Your decision to participate or not will not affect your future relations with the University of Texas at Austin or the Freshman Interest Group (FIG) Program. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time.

What are the possible discomforts and risks?
There are no discomforts and risks known at this time.
If you wish to discuss the information above or any other risks you may experience, you may ask questions now or call the Principal Investigator listed on the front page of this form.

What are the possible benefits to you or to others?
The potential benefits to participation in this study include (a) forming collegial relationships with other former FIG students; (b) an opportunity to discuss FIG experiences in terms of programmatic factors that foster or impede student growth and success in the first year. This data will be useful in that little qualitative information is available in the educational literature to describe the student experience of participating in a learning community. Furthermore, this study will contribute to the body of literature about the value of understanding student experiences as part of the larger student retention puzzle.

If you choose to take part in this study, will it cost you anything?
No. It will only cost you your time.

Will you receive compensation for your participation in this study?
No. You will not receive compensation for your participation in this study?

What if you are injured because of the study?
While there is no known risk, if injuries occur as a result of study activity, eligible University students may be treated at the usual level of care with the usual cost for services at the Student Health Center, but no payment can be provided in the event of a medical problem

If you do not want to take part in this study, what other options are available to you?

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You are free to refuse to be in the study, and your refusal will not influence current or future relationships with The University of Texas at Austin.

How can you withdraw from this research study and who should I call if I have questions?

If you wish to stop your participation in this research study for any reason, you should contact: Cassandre Alvarado at (512) 232-3997 or Marilyn Kameen, Ph.D., Professor at (512) 471-7255. You are free to withdraw your consent and stop participation in this research study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits for which you may be entitled. Throughout the study, the researchers will notify you of new information that may become available and that might affect your decision to remain in the study.

In addition, if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Clarke A. Burnham, Ph.D., Chair, The University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, 512/232-4383.

How will your privacy and the confidentiality of your research records be protected?

Authorized persons from The University of Texas at Austin and the Institutional Review Board have the legal right to review your research records and will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law. If the research project is sponsored then the sponsor also have the legal right to review your research records. Otherwise, your research records will not be released without your consent unless required by law or a court order.

If the results of this research are published or presented at scientific meetings, your identity will not be disclosed.

The focus group sessions will be audiotaped. Prior to the beginning of the audiotaped focus group, you will be given an opportunity to select a pseudonym for the purpose of the study. All documentation will contain only this name. The audiotaped focus groups will be coded so that no personally identifying information is on file. The cassettes will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the investigator's office and will be heard only for research purposes by the investigator and her associates. The cassettes will be retained for possible future analysis.

Will the researchers benefit from your participation in this *study*?
No.

Signatures:
As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks that are involved in this research study:

_____

Signature and printed name of person obtaining consent **Date**

You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this Form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

_____

Printed Name of Subject **Date**

_____

Signature of Subject **Date**

_____

Signature of Principal Investigator **Date**

APPENDIX H: SUMMARY OF RETENTION PROGRAMS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

Gateway

The Gateway Program is designed to give first and second year students access to a quality educational experience. Primarily, the program seeks to introduce Gateway students to the University's vast resources and to encourage each student to take full advantage of the educational opportunities available at the University. After students are admitted to the University they may be invited to participate in the Gateway Program. Students under consideration for Gateway must have achieved a solid academic record in high school, and must be both strongly motivated and willing to meet the demands of the University. Through a selective process, the review committee identifies students who would benefit from Gateway's limited enrollment classes, support services, group association, and academic monitoring. Some of the criteria used to evaluate a candidate include, but are not limited to, high school grade point average, high school rank, SAT/ACT scores, and letters of recommendation.

Retrieved from n (July 24, 2004).

Connexus – Longhorn Scholars Program

Longhorn Scholars is a four-year honors program for top 10% students from selected Texas high schools whose graduates have historically been underrepresented at The University of Texas at Austin. All Longhorn Scholars have been awarded scholarships to attend UT Austin.

Participation in the Longhorn Scholars Program is by invitation. To be eligible, you must graduate from a participating Texas high school and be the recipient of a qualifying scholarship (including the Longhorn Opportunity Scholarship, the Presidential Achievement Scholarship, or the Terry Scholarship). Scholars enjoy the following benefits: Advising Support, Peer Support, Special programming and the opportunity to choose from smaller classes and classes taught by outstanding professors, including members of the Academy of Distinguished Teachers.

Retrieved from
http://www.utexas.edu/student/connexus/scholars/index.html (July 24, 2004).

TIP (Texas Interdisciplinary Plan)

The TIP First-Year is a highly selective academic program in the College of Liberal Arts and the College of Natural Sciences for incoming first-year students who have demonstrated strong motivation and commitment to their own learning while in high school. TIP First-Year creates a small college atmosphere at this major research institution. The program offers a rigorous course of study with an emphasis on core classes and critical thinking in concert with a unique blend of academic opportunities and personal benefits. Each TIP freshman enrolls in three or more courses with other TIP students who share similar academic interests or career goals. The relationships formed in these linked courses often continue outside of class, where TIP students develop an academic and social support structure. During the First-Year, TIP students have more opportunity to develop and enhance their critical thinking abilities. All TIP students enroll in the Critical Thinking Seminar during their first term at UT. The primary goal of this seminar is for students to recognize the traits of a disciplined mind and incorporate them into their academic study. TIP students also have access to : Academic Peer Mentors, Academic Advisors, Learning Lab, Enrichment Activities.

Retrieved from http://www.utexas.edu/tip/about.html#firstacaopp (July 24, 2004).

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VITA

Cassandre Giguere Alvarado was born in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. After growing up in Canada and the United States, she entered The University of Texas at Austin in 1992. She received a Bachelor of Journalism in Public Relations in 1995 and a Master of Education in Higher Education Administration in 1998. During the following years, she was employed with The University of Texas at Austin, serving with the Orientation program, as an academic advisor and as the first director of the Transitional Advising Center, before joining the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs in 1999 to direct the FIG program. In September 1999, she entered the Graduate School of The University of Texas at Austin to pursue a doctorate in Educational Administration.

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This dissertation was typed by the author and formatted by Pattie F. Rose.